

THE MAYAN CURSE

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Charles and Emily Dupont had arrived in Guatemala and were greeted by their guide Sanchez, who would lead them to their hotel. Their lovely niece Julia had accompanied them on this unprecedented trip to Guatemala City from where they would journey north to the city of Tikal that was the site of an ancient Mayan capital. They were noticeably excited since this was the first discovery of ruins in fifty years, and Charles and Emily Dupont were eager to start work on the excavations. Sanchez would lead them to their hotel where they would fly by helicopter from the Mayan rainforest to the ancient city of Tikal where a subterranean find was awaiting. The hotel was a quaint boarding house in a picturesque Spanish setting with fountains out front and Gothic architecture. While standing on the unpaved path holding their bags they felt a sense of awe and foreignness that swept over like a pleasant wind. They were ready to embark on their journey. Sanchez, who was a short, kempt man of Spanish descent, helped them get to the door and walked them inside. The lobby was a picturesque dome that resembled a Spanish villa with frescoes painted on the ceiling that revealed beautiful scenes of unicorns and maidens that were dried and peeling but still amazed the eye. A woman of diminutive stature and bluish hair tied in a coiffeur greeted them at the wooden counter that seemed like real bamboo. Sanchez willingly oversaw the reservations and within minutes the party was checked- in and ready to serenade their rooms. Sanchez waited till they were all broken-in before speaking with Charles about their forthcoming plans. It was his understanding that the party would leave for Tikal in the morning after breakfast. Charles concurred and the two shook hands before the fair-skinned, dutiful chauffeur departed with an uncommon pleasantness. It was characteristic of the people in this region. The rooms were elegant quarters with mahogany walls and floors and colonial furniture. They were bright and airy and the windows were large and ornate and opened up to a view of the mountains. It was a majestic experience and the grandness of the place was coming through. The family seemed content and pleased with the accommodations and quickly set about unpacking and going over their itinerary. The next morning, Sanchez met them in the foyer where the family was waiting with their bags and luggage.

"Greetings," Sanchez said with a smile. "Are you ready for your great adventure?"

"Indeed," Charles said heartily. "How long is the trip to Tikal?"

"It will take two hours by plane," Sanchez replied. "We will reach Flores airport and from there a bus will take us to Tikal."

"Excellent," Charles said contentedly. "We are very excited."

"Indeed," Sanchez replied. "Tikal is a marvelous destination and everything you might expect."

"Wonderful. As they say, on with the show."

The family drove in a fancy town car to a local airport that was basically a country road with a few planes that sat unsupervised on the runway. They boarded one of the carriers, that was a small Cessna, that started up with a rusty motor and were soon in the skies overlooking the city. The Cessna hummed with its old motors over the landscape but seemed to glide perfectly like an eagle's wing. Below, the city faded behind them like a giant shell and they soared beyond the mountains and into the open space. There was an immense sense of freedom as they flew over the landscape that was unfettered and boundless. From the small windows, they could peer out and see a vast carpet of green that seemed overgrown and resplendent. It seemed like a hidden world beneath the foliage with the arms of palms and thousand foot trees masking its beauty. The jungle was wild and overgrown like an exotic foothold. No one dared venture into its heart.

The plane descended into Flores airport and the family climbed down as the wave of the journey passed over them. They were happy to be on solid ground. Sanchez led them to the depot where they purchased tickets and waited to board the bus to Tikal. The bus arrived and it was an old-fashioned truck with festooned paint and illustrations that made it look exotic. They boarded happily and took their seats and were headed beyond the hills to the legendary city. The roads were dirt paths that cut through the rainforest and straddled hills and slopes that seemed breathtaking. Finally, they entered the city of Tikal where a large wooden post greeted them that bore ancient inscriptions like hieroglyphics and carved faces warding off evils. They traveled down the main road until they reached their hotel, which was a small bungalow from where all the ancient sites could be reached in all directions. It was a perfect spot and habitat for the time being where they could easily carry out their work and plans. Sanchez led them inside where the rooms were already prepared and the owners were expecting their visit.

Inside they met Diego, a student of archaeology at Guadalupe University, who would assist them in their work. He was a tall, dark-complexioned young scholar who had a very easygoing personality. He greeted them warmly, and made eye contact with the entire family. The bungalow was quite roomy with modest furniture and windows and doors that were made out of reeds and seemed homey. They knew they were inside a foreign place. There was a desk in the lobby that was the reception and the interior was a circular path with rooms along the outer edge. There was a handmade Oriental rug that was spread over a lounge area and handmade objects of Mesoamerican origin. It had a native taste and grandeur that seemed to make it austere. There were exotic flowers in pots and tropical plants that gave the space its charm. It seemed to lift their spirits.

"Nice to meet your acquaintance," Diego exclaimed as he greeted them with warm affection. "It's nice to finally meet you."

"The sentiment is mutual," Charles smiled familiarly. "We are so glad to make it. We are very excited to set to work."

"Indeed," Diego replied at once. "You are our honored guests. We are happy to welcome you. It is a great opportunity for us to seek your advice and wisdom. The uncovering of a lost city and tombs beneath the jungle is unprecedented and we want the best opinion."

"So tell me Diego are the tombs truly Mayan?" Charles asked audaciously.

"Yes, indeed," Diego replied with a gusto. "They are one of a kind. Untouched for thousands of years. Finally revealed to us by electromagnetic imaging and brought to light for the first time."

"This is truly historic," Charles remarked. "There hasn't been a discovery like this in this part of the world since the sixties when Charles Lark discovered the Mayan pyramids in the Yucatan. This will change the landscape."

"You are right," Diego said with alacrity. "Well, tomorrow, I will take you up to the mines myself but for now I'm sure you are looking forward to a little rest. I know you will be amazed at the real thing."

"Thank you for everything Diego," Charles gushed. "We are enthralled to be here."

"Very well. Then I'll see you early in the morning before the mountains yawn as they say in our country."

With that, Diego departed and the family set out settling into their rooms with Charles and Sanchez taking one room and Emily and Julia the other. The beds were oversized and covered with mosquito nets and the rooms smelled like sage and pine. For lighting, there was an oil lamp and furnace and Moorish fountain for washing was situated in a nestle. Everything was classy and refined and catered to the fine tastes. The men kept to themselves with Charles looking over maps and measurements and the women simply ironed and learned the language. They would soon be in the throes of the jungle and amidst the ancient ruins that lay dormant for centuries. The excitement was building. Sanchez studied the American dictionary all night.

The next morning, the party met Diego in the foyer for their journey into the heart of the jungle. Diego was dressed in khakis and a flannel shirt topped off with a fishing hat that you see in America. It seemed that he was ready for the deep jungle. The family greeted him warmly and their eyes were bright with excitement. A camper was waiting for them outside and they all got in. It was comfortable and spacious and there was a plenty of room to store their supplies and luggage. Diego led the way driving down a solitary road through the thick jungle towards the local roads of Tikal. It was a scenic drive and the family watched the landscape through the camper's windows with awe and wonder. Everything seemed green and alive. The rainforest was a exotic locale with tropical fruits and palms and mysterious trees and shrub. There were exotic birds and parakeets that seemed to fitter about

and the occasional toucan that seemed to be exalted. It was a colorful and vibrant scene like none other that they had witnessed. The jungle had a sense of grandeur as if it was undiscovered territory. It was a magnificent cacophony of nature and beauty. It rose up over the landscape like a pavilion of life and sustenance and touched the sky with its warmth. Julia spotted some storks in a pond that seemed dreamlike.

They finally reached the main corridor leading into the city and drove up to an excavation site. Workers were already digging up the soil and it seemed like a full-scale operation. They could see the remnants of an old Mayan structure already coming into view from beneath the grass and dirt and the arches of a beautiful pyramid slowly beginning to show. It was a magnificent and breathtaking view as they stood back and took in the breadth and magnitude of the find. The workers were carefully removing the soil and debris and placing markers along the entire structure to determine its size and shape. For years, it had been buried under overgrown jungle and mudslides and was finally beginning to rise up. Charles estimated that it was approximately fifty feet tall and featured a staircase that seemed like the scales of a cobra. The final plateau was a finely carved tablet that seemed like a ceremonial crown.

"This is the pyramid of Coaxal," Diego announced. "It was a offering to the God Oaxa by the Mayan people. It has been here for more than five thousand years. When the city was discovered, this was the first excavation site. We are very happy that it has lasted for all those years."

"Remarkable," Charles surmised. "Do you know anything about its material?"

"We believe it is mostly granite," Diego exhorted. "These were the predominant building materials during that time. It was easy to trek it down from the mountain."

"Interesting," Charles replied. "It seems that it was beautifully preserved. There is not much damage at all."

"The rain forest seemed to have kept it safe," Diego explained. "It was protected from the heavy rain and storms. It was just hidden for a very long time. Now it is part of our national glory."

"Indeed. It is quite beautiful. Do you anything about its arches?"

"Only that it bears the inscription of some Mayan gods. Also, from the ancient Mayan tongue, some of it means that it was used in a ritualistic way. For the sacrifices of animals and men. It also has some kind of ominous warning for trespassers."

This seemed to spur Emily's interest and she recalled the ancient legend that anyone traversing on a Mayan pyramid is cursed.

"Is it true that it could be the curse of Quetzalcoatl?" Emily wondered.

"I highly doubt it," Diego disclaimed. "It pre-dates Quetzalcoatl so there could be no link to that famous legend. But perhaps, it could just be some kind of caveat that is very common in Mayan culture."

"I wish I could climb to the top," Julia blared out.

"It is very high," Diego acknowledged. "Once the excavation is complete, I'm sure there will be tours for everyone."

"Will you be able to show us the rest of walls and confines," Charles asked.

"Certainly," Diego replied. "We are ready to continue."

The group made its way around the first excavation that was cordoned off by posts and wire forming an intricate grid, and proceeded to an enclosure that was a large descent into an amphitheater. It was a massive landmark made out of solid rock and descended nearly twenty steps where it reached a proscenium stage. It had a majestic appearance as if it was an arena for a king or a queen. It was fully bare and seemed it could seat thousands. The steps were hulking and formidable and descended like the layers of a cake reaching a pit that was undoubtedly used for musicians and players similar to an American opera house. The stage rose up in front of the pit and was nearly six feet high and was misty like a hollow theater that once was alive. It seemed almost ominous as if great plays and tragedies were performed on its great plane in its heyday. The shadows still bounced off its stones and cracks.

"A triumphant sight," Charles exclaimed. "How long has it been here?"

"It is estimated that it has been here for nearly five thousand years," Diego replied. "It is completely intact and is in its original form."

"Do you know anything about its origin?" Charles asked.

"Only that it was used as a royal theater for the king or queen at the time," Diego ascertained. "Likely, it was also used for speeches and sermons to unite the people. Perhaps, that is why it bears such an ominous presence. It may have even been used for sacrifices or punishment."

"Do you mean like a Gulag?" Emily asked.

"Not exactly," Diego denounced. "The Mayans were not ruthless and never humiliated their prisoners. Sacrifices were mostly voluntary and they were offerings to the Gods."

"I see," Emily rationalized the entire scene. "So it was like a gathering place or a community theater kind of a like a public theater in America. We have plenty of those. Is there any significance of its location?"

"Only that it is was in the center of the city," Diego proclaimed. "It was situated here so that it would be easy for everyone to gather or be summoned. Also, the spirits of the sacrifices would also bring glad tidings to their land and people as is the legend."

"Remarkable, indeed," Charles burst out. "What a truly astonishing find. It is truly a legacy that will live on. Let's hope it can bring us more knowledge of the culture."

"We are beginning to see its importance in the overall social system," Diego revealed his vast understanding. "We can see how they interacted with each other, the hierarchy, and their fealty to a larger good. It is quite intriguing."

"Will it eventually be opened to the public?" Charles asked.

"Perhaps, eventually," Diego guessed. "But for now, it is under wraps. How about we continue on?"

They all consented, and walked out into the jungle cover to see the rest of the underground city. They walked beyond some of the forest trees and entered a pavilion where the trees had been spread away. Immersed in the throes of the forest was a prodigious temple that seemed like an ancient Mayan pyramid. It had carvings that were mysterious and esoteric revealing faces and expressions that were peering. It was topped off by a stone arch that gave it its prominence. Around it lay large casks and pots for burnt offerings to the Gods and an exquisite fountain that was completely dried out and unused for thousands of years that lay bare like the skin of a goddess. A wooden gate sealed off its interior and the entire structure was shrouded with ivy and overgrown shrub. It had a presence and size that was staggering but at the same time, evoked mystery, wonder and intrigue. What lay beyond was anyone's speculation.

"It is marvelous," Emily commented.

"This is the Tomb of Quetzal," Diego pronounced. "It is the remnant of a famous Mayan king, Quetzal. It is his surviving legacy. We were amazed to find it hidden for so long in this dense forest. The tomb was erected to honor the king and it is believed that he is buried here. It is also believed that he was the ruler of his ancient city."

"Fascinating," Charles remarked. "Did it have any other uses?"

"We believe it was also a throne room," Diego expounded. "This is where the king conducted his business and met with his dignitaries. You can tell from the entrance

since there was a garden and walking path that insinuates a public office. However, after the king's death it was sealed off."

The party walked around the grounds and admired the local scenery and tapestry of the garden that seemed like it was an abstract shape. A large sundial greeted them at a crossing and there were other oddities like weather vanes and tablets that seemed highly modern and advanced. Diego explained that they were used to measure the rain water to determine the harvest and that the Mayans studied meteorology. Finally, they beheld a centuries-old sculpture of a hawk clenching a fish that was a main attraction and also a symbol of Mayan hunting and gathering. Sanchez took a picture of it with his old-fashioned shutter camera.

"Have they been able to breach the gate?" Charles wondered.

"Unfortunately, the gate was sealed from within and has a strange locking mechanism that relies on a strict combination of symbols and Mayan letters and we are still trying to decipher the code," said Diego sullenly. "However, we have been able to enter at the ground level from a secret portico that was discovered accidentally by one of the workers. It is basically a vent that must've been used as an escape door for emergencies. It was unnoticeable since it was meant to blend into the overall architecture. So we have been able to do some exploration but on a limited basis since the portico is too small to bring in any heavy equipment."

"Have you seen the inside?" Charles asked.

"No," Diego responded. "Not me personally but the lead researchers led by Mr. Albert and his men have been leading the effort."

"Who is he?" Charles asked.

"He is the head of research at the University of San Paz. He is leading the efforts here on behalf of the University. He is well-known in the field and was the foremost researcher to excavate the tombs at Chichen Itza. You will be pleased to meet him."

"Excellent," Charles gushed. "This is truly a privilege."

"Let us see the rest of the grounds," Diego said with pluck. "And then we'll meet with the research team."

By now, a fog was slowly spreading over the trees and forest and mist was enveloping the lower altitude. It was a nostalgic as if the spirits of the ancient Mayans had descended on their forgotten city. Diego led his group beyond the confines of the Tomb and beyond a street bazaar where the remnants of old shops and apothecaries still stood. This was the Grand Bazaar where the community bartered and sold goods and was an epicenter in the Mayan culture. Stone slabs where meat was cut or fish was sold still marked the exact spots of the trade and exchange, and ancient scales and pottery were being unearthed by researchers. It

was a frantic scene with men heavily digging into the ground to upturn anything of value and scientists examining the rare specimens. Rolling pins and dishware, clay pots and ceramics were innumerable and revealed a vast culture that was highly independent and self-sufficient. Even a process for melting silver and gold was present to form exquisite jewelry and artifacts. It was a wondrous site full of unique arts and crafts that were popular in Mayan everyday culture. The Grand Bazaar showed a social system that was quite functional and designed to elevate the thought of these bygone people. It was also rife with tributes to the King Quetzal in the form of engravings, coins and currency.

Beyond the Grand Bazaar lay the Palestra, an Olympic sized football field or the Mayan version of the Circus Maximus. This is where the Mayans played football and practiced archery. It was also used for foot races and other competitions such as javelin-throwing and pole-vaulting. It had seven lanes that were nearly ten miles long with a grassy middle that was ideal for ceremonies and sports events. There were large stone markers that were used for measuring distances and giant cupolas that were likely used for lighting torches and garlands. It showed a love of the outdoors and a taste for fitness and physical prowess. Perhaps, the king presided over events here and trophies and awards were presented to the best sportsmen. It all seemed to come alive before their eyes.

The family gathered near a Pavilion where under a Gazebo they were greeted by Mr. Albert who was dining with some of his entourage, out of the heat of the open landscape. Albert wore dark sunglasses and had a French mustache that seemed neatly trimmed and wore a sly smirk. His entourage were several men of German, Spanish and European descent and all were partaking of biscuits and tea in Chinese porcelain. The warm humid air was hotly felt on their faces and brows and they were cooling in the shade. They had mules tied to some trees that were laden with supplies and equipment and Albert was surveying a map with a magnifying glass. Some of the men were sitting and the German with a red mustache standing erect and staring blankly in front of him. Diego greeted them with a hearty hello and Mr. Albert put away his affairs.

"Sorry to intrude," Diego broke out. "These are the Duponts. They came all the way from America. They were hired by the Mexican Embassy to oversee some of the operations. This is Charles Dupont and his wife Emily and their niece Julia."

"How do you do, Mr. Dupont," Albert said with a sudden alertness.

"Very well," Charles replied. "It is nice to meet your acquaintance and we hope it will be a splendid mission. We are looking forward to working with your team."

"Certainly," Albert grinned. "It is an honor for us to partner with our American friends. This is a momentous occasion and it should be shared with others in the scientific community. Where are you staying?"

"We are staying in the bungalows right outside Tikal," Charles replied. "It is quite quaint."

"Splendid," Albert said with a twinkle. "We are staying not too far from you in a private tent that we are using as our base of operations. The dig is being overseen by more than one-thousand workers so it is a massive project. Once complete, the city of Oaxaca will be the preeminent find of the century. But there are underground tunnels and tombs that will likely take a long time to understand fully. Have you seen the temple?"

"Indeed," Charles replied. "It is quite stunning."

"It is the hallmark of this excavation," Albert answered. "We believe it is the burial place of the king and so it will consummate our findings to reveal a functioning society. The secret door has been promising and once full entry is achieved, we can undertake a more concerted effort. Won't you partake of some wine?"

The family sat at the table and were given wine and cheese and Julia was offered dessert. The cheese was Monterrey and was excellent with the wine. Julia ate gelatin that she licked with her fork. Almost simultaneously, two storks landed in a field near them and began grazing. They were enchanting. A waiter replenished the tea for the guests. It was quite a classy dining scene. Albert rolled some dice in his hand.

"It was used for leisure," Albert said emphatically. "The Mayans loved leisurely games and pastimes."

"Very similar to a Western concept," Charles concurred.

"Indeed," Albert went on. "They were very much like us in their way of living and manners. They are an important link in the evolution of human society. Much of their civilization resembles our modern cities."

"Did they have the concept of marriage?" Emily asked.

"Yes of course. They believed in marriage but wed many wives and their generations were intermingled. We believe that's what made them survive for thousands of years and retain their culture. Many civilizations otherwise would go extinct."

"Quite astonishing," Charles gushed. "We owe them a lot."

The waiter brought over some grapes in a crystal dish. Albert sliced some meat on his plate. He took a bite of the meat and partook of some olives. He nibbled on it stoically and seemed to be entranced. He then broke the silence.

"Will you join us at the tomb tomorrow to oversee more exploration?" Albert asked.

“Certainly,” Charles replied forthwith. “We’d love to.”

“It seems that there are a series tunnels beneath the tomb that can be accessed by a stairwell. We discovered it recently but the lack of supplies and access have hindered the search. However, you might be pleased with a tour of the catacombs. It might be perfect for an article in Life magazine.”

“It would be an honor of course,” Charles said heartily. “We hope it is not an inconvenience.”

“Not at all,” Albert shrugged. “You are our guests and fellow connoisseurs. We must indulge you. Very well, then. We all will convene at the gate of the Temple tomorrow after breakfast.”

The next morning Diego and Sanchez picked up the family in front of the bungalow in an army jeep. It was perfect for touring and seeing the sights. Charles, Emily and Julia took their seats in the back. It felt like a jungle safari. Diego had borrowed the jeep from the local army base to conduct his work. It was perfect for the country roads and off-beat paths. Charles carried his binoculars and watched the scenery attentively studying the geography and topography. The land was very rocky, steep, with jagged cliffs and ravines and the jungle sprawled over a vast verdant landscape. Emily and Julia sat close together and seemed ecstatic and giddy. Diego wore sunglasses and the wind whipped his hair over his face.

They arrived in front of the Tomb of Quetzal after a short ride that seemed exhilarating. A mist and orange hue had taken over the site that was the byproduct of the morning sun. It seemed to have carved off the horizon like an orange peel. The tomb seemed to be exalted in front of them when they encountered Albert and his men around the front gate. Albert greeted them and led them around the gate to the secret door. The door was basically a slab that was hiding in the pattern of the stonework. It had been opened by carefully wedging a steel rod and forcing it open. Darkness lurked inside the half-open door and the family stood by with bated breath.

“This is the only point of access,” Albert confirmed pressing his hand on the door. “It was discovered accidentally by workers who noticed a leak and found the opening. We are lucky to have a way in.”

“Indeed,” Charles deduced. “This is a remarkable find.”

“There is an old legend that says that whoever enters the Tomb of Quetzal will leave his soul to the king,” Albert mentioned ominously. “But it is only a legend for young children to scare them away. We are grown-ups.”

“Quite true,” Emily remarked. “This is an extraordinary moment.”

“So without further ado, why don’t we enter,” Albert requested.

One by one, the party entered stepping foot inside the cold stone structure and feeling the dampness and muskiness come over them. The tomb was large and cavernous and seemed to sigh like an old giant awakening from its sleep. Light from the porticoes seemed to dispel the darkness. They walked across the threshold marveling at the structure. Its stone walls seemed to invoke power and mystery. It was as if there were eyes in the darkness watching them. It was chilling but exhilarating. They forged on sensing the cold briskness until they reached the bosom. In the dim light, they could make out intricate shapes and symbols all along the edges and walls. It was a marvelous excavation. A stone slab was the centerpiece with a skylight directly above it. Light descended from above to create a mock representation of the sun's movement. Etched in the stone were marks like those of a dial to track time. It was quite intricate and complex for an ancient dial. According to Albert, it was also used as an astrolabe.

"The skylight looks out onto the north star," Albert explained. "When the stars move, the light is reflected back on these points to create a virtual astrolabe. The Mayans were astronomers and they believed in cosmology."

"Fascinating," Charles remarked. "Does it still work?"

"Of course. No one has touched it for thousands of years. It still creates the illusion. Hence, the position of the pyramid. You can still look out at it at night and see the North Star."

"What is the north star?" Julia asked.

"It is the brightest star in the night sky," Emily explained. "By looking at it, you can tell your direction anywhere on earth."

"Exactly," Albert concurred. "By looking at it, they were able to know their place anywhere on earth. Hence, their kingdom would be blessed. The Mayans looked upon the stars for guidance. A favorable sighting would mean a good harvest."

"Did they use it for other things," Charles asked.

"Indeed," Albert replied. "The Mayans saw their future in the stars. By studying them, they believed that they could map out their destinies. Quetzacoatl relied on the stars to rule his kingdom, appoint heirs and make predictions. But we believe that it also has significance."

"Like what?" Charles asked.

"The various placement of these skylights could also reveal a map to hidden tombs but it is still speculation."

Everyone contemplated for a moment. Forthwith, Albert led them to a stairwell at one corner of the temple that seemed to spiral down into the abyss. He held out an

oil lamp in front of him that seemed to illuminate the darkness, and led the others down the steps. It was black and lurid, but intriguing. The eager visitors cautiously descended feeling around one edge of the wall that felt cold and icy. The light seemed to guide them further into the depths and the circular steps seemed to wind down like the body of a snake. Finally, they reached the floor and gathered close together inside a vast subterranean tunnel. It was moping and musty.

"Alas, the catacombs," Albert remarked. "This is the hidden tunnel system that we've been seeking all our life."

"Do you mean the Catacombs of Quetzacoatl?" Charles asked.

"Indeed," Albert replied. "The legendary tombs. This is where it is believed that the king is buried. But the tunnel systems are vast and we haven't uncovered everything. In fact, you are the first outsiders to lay eyes upon it. We felt that we owed it to you for traveling so far. This is one of the greatest finds in all of archaeology. We are the cusp of making history. Once the tombs are excavated we will have intimate knowledge of the workings of the Mayans like never before."

"Astonishing," Charles gasped. "It is remarkable. Has there been an official announcement?"

"Not yet," Albert replied. "It is still under wraps. We want to make sure it is safe and not a hoax."

"Makes sense," Charles agreed.

"Allow me to show you one of the special rooms."

They followed Albert along a path that seemed to be dug out by expert miners. The path led around many curves and edges and went on like a labyrinth. Along the way, they witnessed scattered bones and artifacts of the ancient Mayans. They passed niches where sculptures once stood and were now crumbled or scarred. They finally entered an official room that was part of the elaborate caverns. It was lined with brick and adorned with porcelain. Inside, a large dais sat on a raised platform and greeted them. Behind it stood a marble desk for official ceremonies. It was the most modern sighting since their arrival.

"This is the king's sitting room," Albert said with pomp. "This is where he presided over his counsel. He sat on this chair and heard cases. The desk behind him was used for displays. This was also his private room and study where he spent much of his time. It was also protected from his enemies."

"Is that real marble?" Charles asked with genuine interest.

"Certainly," Albert replied. "The marble was brought in from the mountains. It is one of the rare pieces still left in the kingdom. It forms a rare legacy to know that the

Mayans were more than just hunters and gatherers. They had a system of rule much like ours today."

"You mean like a democracy," Emily asked.

"Not exactly," Albert replied. "More like a monarchy. Or an oligarchy. The king was at the highest place, then his ministers, then his officers and then his subjects. However, everyone had an equal place. The Mayans had no slaves."

"Interesting," Charles said. "I wonder what led to the downfall."

"It's anyone's guess," Albert replied. "All kingdoms must fall sometime. Perhaps, it was a plague or something else. But they definitely left behind an important legacy."

"Do you really think it was a plague," Emily asked.

"I'm not sure," Albert replied. "There is no record of that or any other kind of catastrophic event. It seems that the people just died off or faded away. Or perhaps, it was a real curse."

"Could it really be?" Charles asked.

"The Mayans believed in the afterlife," Albert continued. "It is said that they may have transcended to another realm and that they believed in ascension. It is a type of departure from this world to the next. But alas, it is still superstition."

It was quite staggering. Albert held out a bowl. It was pure gold. It gleamed and was shaped like a perfect goblet. Small jewels covered its rim. It looked royal and princely. All eyes were transfixed. The studded cup had a rare beauty that was unlike any other. It captivated them and commanded attention. It sparkled in Albert's hand like a piece of crystal.

"This is a saucer that was found in the catacombs," Albert revealed. "It belonged to the king and was part of his official possessions. We believe it is the only one left. Likely, everything else was taken away by thieves. This is the last of its kind left. But it is a link to the past."

The party returned to the upper level after seeing the rare object and exited the tomb. They gathered outside in the garden and refreshed themselves, stretching their arms and legs. Everyone seemed mesmerized and enchanted. It was eye-opening and a visit to the ancient tomb was exhilarating. They hoped to see more. The tunnels underneath were vast and further exploration was warranted. Albert made a pledge. Diego asked if there was an actual burial site.

"Do we know anything about Quetzcoat's burial site?" Diego asked.

"Not at this exact moment," Albert said tamely. "We haven't located everything yet. The tunnels are deep and there is a lot of exploration to do. Once we can get more supplies and equipment, it will be easier."

"That makes sense," Charles said. "It will surely be noteworthy."

"Well, it will certainly shed light on a lot of questions," Albert estimated. "We will have full knowledge of the rites and rituals of the Mayans."

They walked around the sculpture garden that was hemmed in with rose bushes and a dried up fountain with an image of a giant fish leaping out of the water, and exited the enclosure. The tomb was separated by a man-made fence that was wrapped around its perimeter and a natural boundary like a moat that had been present in its heyday. Everything was overgrown and marshy. A rustling noise startled them. One of Albert's men opened fire with a shotgun that went awry. Moments later, a jaguar leapt out of the trees and disappeared beyond the jungle's veil. It was a beautiful sight and a rare glimpse at a native jaguar was breathtaking. Its spotted coat and sheen was marvelous and feline manner startling. The onlookers gasped with amazement. Albert quelled their curiosity.

"Their inhabitants of this part of the jungle," Albert explained. "They are nocturnal and are rarely seen. However, from time to time there are sightings. You needn't be concerned."

"It's majestic," Emily sighed. "How many do you think there are?"

"We're not exactly sure," Albert replied. "Perhaps, fifty to a one-hundred live in the jungle. They thrived during the Mayan period but were killed off by hunters. Now they are endangered."

"Interesting," Charles induced. "It's kind of a like a little safari."

Albert ended the tour and asked for leave to return to the work inside the tomb and other affairs while the family would return to the bungalows to rest. They would reunite in the evening at Albert's camp for dinner and a Mayan outdoor cook-out by the locals. It seemed delightful and the parties separated hoping to return and resume their affectations. Albert spun off with a flair and whisked away in a brisk manner.

Later in the day, Diego returned to the huts, where the family was resting during the afternoon siesta and was frantic. Apparently, there had been an accident at the mines and he had brought the news. It would mean a shutdown of operations at the tomb until things were settled.

"Unfortunately, there has been an accident," Diego said deliriously. "A worker fell from one of the scaffoldings this afternoon and they've closed everything off for the day."

"My, my," Emily exclaimed. "Was it serious?"

"Unfortunately, he didn't make it," Diego sighed. "He was a good man but he slipped from a great height. It is very unfortunate."

"Is there anything we can do?" Charles asked.

"Well, we have to sit out the rest of the day due to the mishap," Diego frowned. "There is nothing we can do until the matter is settled."

"How ironic that we were over there today," Charles said warily.

"Indeed," Diego affirmed. "It is quite shocking."

"Is Albert looking into it," Charles asked.

"Yes, they are in charge of the investigation," Diego remarked.

"Well, I guess it's in good hands then," Charles perceived.

"However, we may still be able to visit the ruins at Alcatel," Diego suggested.

"What are those?" Emily asked.

"They are the ancient ruins beyond the village on the Illago hills," Diego expounded. "They date even further back than some of the Mayan pyramids. I think they might be perfect for your research."

"That would be very apropos," Charles said emphatically. "Let's make the most of it."

They visited the ruins at Illago that were a picturesque valley of great tombs and temples on top of the crimson hills. It was a beautiful sunny day that marked the occasion. Everything was pastoral. The ruins were mainly stretches of walls and mounds that lay in a geometric pattern atop of the high hills. The red color due to the intense sun made them look burnt. It was like a fire blazing in the sky. The intricate shape and size of the walls were unique and distant. It revealed a society that was organized and took pride in their habiliments. It revealed quarters for communal gatherings, a marketplace, a foundry, a stable and a large basking place for pottery. The extensive ruins and ceramics gave a picture of a people who were quite learned and advanced. It fascinated all that laid eyes upon the vast prairie.

They entered a church that resembled a Western building in its shape and form. It had a steeple that was crumbling and a façade like that of a barn. It was quite worn down and battered by the ages. However, it was still holding up and gave them safe harbor. The walls were all but weathered away and the inside seemed gutted by years of decay. But its overall shape was still intact and easily revealed pews and an altar for the priests. They walked up cautiously to examine the altar. It was a

granite block faded with time and bordered by exquisite porcelain and marble reliefs. On each side two angels with harps were depicted on a wooden screen and behind the altar, an image of a falcon was etched into the stone. It seemed to transfix them.

"This is the Church of the Holy Monks," Diego explained. "It's the only one of its kind in all this locale. They were a minority and they practiced their own rituals."

"Interesting," Charles remarked. "It seems quite like a Western church."

"What happened to them?" Emily asked.

"We believe they were persecuted," Diego replied. "They preached beatitudes that went against the common law. However, they had a significant following and lasted for many centuries. Eventually, all the monks were wiped out by wars and plague."

"What is that box over there," Julia asked pointing to a chest that seemed to be cast off in one corner of the room.

"Not sure," Diego sprang up. "Let's take a look."

They walked over to the chest that seemed like a large pirate's treasure and seemed old and decayed. Its lid was still bolted by an old lock and the entire chest was dust-ridden. Diego grabbed a shovel that was nearby and hit the lock repeatedly. After a few attempts, the lock broke off and it was as if Sinbad's cave had just opened up. They stood back as Diego raised the lid and opened the centuries-old storage compartment. The old myth of Pandora's Box came to mind. The lid opened and a swell of dust rose up from out of the box like a dragon's sigh and they covered their eyes and faces. When it had gone and the air cleared, they peered inside and laid their eyes on the Monk's personal horde. It was more like a survival kit, or spiritual collection. It seemed like the contents were used for mass such as a goblet, wreaths, cloaks, crosses and sacraments. One particular item caught their eye. It was a key tied to a necklace that was made of bronze and still preserved. It seemed important and eminent. They needed to know its purpose so Diego secured it in his possession.

"This is an amazing discovery," Charles said emphatically. "It is worthy of displaying in a museum."

"We are lucky to find it," Diego acknowledged. "It is quite rare that it lasted and was not lost or stolen."

"Quite true," Emily remarked. "We owe it to Julia who saw it."

"Indeed," Diego said with a rise. "She is quite a spelunker."

They all smiled and were covered by a warm feeling. It had been a productive day and they had come into some luck.

It was time to return to the huts and perhaps inquire on the rest of the excavations. As they lunched, one of Albert's men appeared and requested that everyone should gather at the mango groves near the base of the Machupichu, the city's oldest pyramid. He wanted to gather them and assign specific tasks. They arrived to dispel a swarm of crows.

Albert greeted the factions. "We will break up into teams. Red team will mine the excavations north of Souza, where they will mine the fields next to the old Mayan burial site. Blue team will excavate near the site of the Eagle's Nest (the Eagle's Nest was a remarkable Mayan statue erected thousands of years ago at the summit of one of the oldest mountains and was a famous landmark). Green team will be escorted by me to scour the caves below the temple, which we intend to search thoroughly. Well then, you all have your assignments. Everyone will report back to the camp before sunset where they will be asked to present any findings."

The crowd dispersed with the Duponts waiting in the square for Albert's further instructions. It was a sunny day and the heat was melting their faces. It seemed that the Mayan earth was radiating. Albert descended from his raised speaker's box and greeted them. He mentioned returning to the caves beneath the temple to continue foraging in the tunnels for secret passageways. It was known that King Quetzalcoatl had dug many secret passageways to avert his enemies and access his secret rooms and tunnels. It was Albert's mission to locate all the rooms, especially the king's treasure room, where he hoped to locate the ancient Mayan riches. It would be a monumental find and seal his name in the annals of historiography.

The Duponts accompanied Albert and his men into the tomb, where the sunlight was breaking from the beautiful ornamental glass. It cast vivid shadows in all directions. The temple was damp and wet and had a musky smell that was familiar. Today, the search party had brought with them a litany of shovels, pitchforks and accoutrements to help navigate the tunnels more efficiently. It was a substantial gear. The searchers made a descent into the dark lower chambers carefully climbing down the spine-like stairs that resembled Dragon's steps. They entered a different partition that was separated from the main rooms where they had ventured last, and it seemed like a dark and more ominous space. It was full of mist and carvings of mythical creatures that seemed to stare aghast. The room seemed to fume the spirit of the dead like a breathing dragon. They traversed a great hallway where the blue agave on the walls seemed to create a luminous glow. It was quite enchanting and mesmerizing as the blue crystals sparkled in the eyes and illuminated the path. The corridor seemed to come alive in blue color. They walked in the shadows until they reached a foot bridge linking two corridors. It seemed like a formidable barrier. The bridge was elevated with stone steps that were loosely connected with ropes and ties and hanging over a steep drop. Below was a dark void that seemed endless and unknown with no visibility to the naked eye. The entire apparatus seemed unstable and rocky. But it was the only access to the other side and was their only means to cross. Albert led the party across urging calm and

poise. They went over one after the other carefully planting each foot on the dilapidated slabs hoping to keep balance. Emily looked down below and shut her eyes in horror as only the dark void looked back with ominous shrill. She could not imagine what lurked below or if the pit was used for men and stones. Quite literally, it could have been used for sacrifices and the bodies of virgins or young babies had been lowered into the depths to appease the king. The thought made her squirmy. Finally, they made it across and Emily was happy that all of them had crossed over safely and were on the other side. Albert lit a cigar like a proud explorer who had ventured upon a great land. Indeed, he had set his foot on uncharted territory since the age of the Mayans, where perhaps no one had tread in a thousand years. As the last men made their way over, the thought of victory was soon vaporized, when one of the slabs gave way and a body was pulled down, barely hanging with an outstretched arm, until his comrades could not reach him, and was pulled into the depths. His shriek echoed and faded away giving the sense that the pit had no end. It made them shudder. Albert coolly looked away, ignoring the fatal accident and resuming the march. It was their first taste of the curse of the Lost Tomb.

They continued marching until reaching a cave that was embedded by an amazing running waterfall. It was remarkable to see water still running for so many years and creating an effervescent pool in the center of the cave. Albert remarked that the cave was well known to experts since it had been recorded by scribes in ancient manuscripts and was known as the fountain of Everlasting Life. It was meant to restore the king's health. It literally looked like an ancient spa. Albert transcribed the ancient text on the walls and read them aloud.

"He who enters shall be granted everlasting life," he read. "The waters of the fountain shall renew his health and restore his mind, body and soul. He will feel young again, rejuvenated, like a phoenix. He will feel invigorated as if he has an electric charge. As if his soul has been reborn. He will feel as if he could fly like a dragon, run like the wind, and swim like a trout. He will feel masculinized. Since the waters are sacred, the one who enters will be blessed with eternal health and prosperity."

It was quite an inscription and evoked awe. Indeed, it was a sacred spot, still preserved. It was bound to win acclaim and garner attention. They only wondered if the myth of the fountain was indeed true. Could it in fact restore life? It was a question for the future explorers who might venture into the cave. But they could easily imagine the king bathing in the waters and exuding youth and vitality among his people. Perhaps, it was believed he was an immortal king who had the secret to life. Perhaps, it was all legend. Albert posed in front of the fountain for a picture. He looked like a great hunter standing in front of a kill. When the camera flashed, a thousand bats were stirred and came flying down from the ceiling, upstarting them. They went scrambling, as the bats passed over their heads, scampering and prodding them, until leaving the cave. When it was all over, they were relieved. It seemed that a sleeping dragon was rousing with every poke and prod.

They finally reached a cloister that seemed to be an underground garden that persisted miraculously beneath the surface like an oasis. It was a spectacular sight with fully grown mangroves thriving in a prosperous fashion, and eucalyptus and pomegranate groves encircling a giant cup. The exotic plants and shrubs seemed to have wild origins and were preserved by hidden running water and sunlight from a crater. This remarkable ecosystem had lasted with no outside interference and continuing to give off vitality and abundance. The cave was brightened by the variety of plants such as hibiscus, chrysanthemum and the Venus flytrap. It was all very exotic and bemusing. Julia picked out an apple blossom and put it in her hair. Her doting aunt smiled sweetly at her appearance.

They walked over to a basin that was pure porcelain. It seemed like a place of baptism. Beyond it was a grove with a sanctuary or possibly harem that belonged to the king. It was fitted with sleeping cots and other trinkets that were of the amorphous breed. The walls were inlaid with gold and intricate carvings revealed the traces of an exotic kingdom. Pots and ceramics aligned the room and armor and armaments lay around as a sign of the warrior class. It was a breathtaking discovery to find such a hidden world in the midst of the Mayan kingdom. They knew they were deep in the throes of the lost city and here, was the farthest tip of their incursions. In it, they would surely find a secret to unravel the mystery of the Mayans. The enclave would lead them to a rare find. Writings that Albert carried showed him that a hidden room existed beyond this spot that was likely the vault. However, a hidden wall needed to be found that would lead them to the room. Charles was roused by the whole idea.

"Do you mean the king's treasure is located somewhere in this cave?" Charles asked.

"Indeed," Albert replied. "It was mentioned in these ancient writings. The king was fond of his treasure and kept it in a secret room. However, a hidden wall was used. We don't know the location of the wall. It is anyone's guess."

"There must be some way to locate it," Charles wondered.

"The Mayans used a lot of codes," Albert sighed. "Likely, the wall can be found by deciphering some kind of ancient text."

"I am an expert at Mayan inscriptions," Emily mentioned. "Perhaps, I can give it a try."

Emily began reading the inscriptions and translating some of the messages. Some of them pertained to wars, and migrations; others pertained to colonists and unrest. They were esoteric and had important meanings. Finally, one inscription read that a hidden room where the king's glory was locked up could only be found beyond a verdant gate. Emily took this to mean that the gate must be overgrown. At once, the team began looking for walls that had been covered up by fosse. Finally, on an

eastern wall, one of the men found a gate with symbol of a fish, when slightly pushed, opened and led into a brilliant hall. The team walked through in pure awe and delight.

Herein, were the king's quarters and private storeroom. It was gilded, inlaid with jewels and brilliant stones. A massive chest lay open with innumerable coins and treasure. It gleamed in the eye like a distant planet on a dark night. They had located the ancient Mayan treasure, the pride of the jungle's inhabitants. It was Albert's lifelong mission and had finally risen. It would undoubtedly cement his reputation as one of the foremost archaeologists of his day and explorers. He would be celebrated by the scholarly community. However, on a panel at the entrance over their heads seemed to suggest a warning. Emily read it with her expert knowledge.

"Be warned. He who dares take this treasure will have incurred the Mayan curse."

"The Mayan curse?" Charles stuttered.

"It is just hogwash," Albert exclaimed. "We will have someone here first thing tomorrow to haul it off. It is our rightful property."

Emily was unsettled. "Might it be true," she wondered. "After all, the Mayans were superstitious."

"It is only mumbo jumbo," Albert berated. "There is no such thing as a curse. After all, this is a modern century. We are not grave robbers. We are simply requisitioning these articles for research. After all, what could possibly be wrong with that?"

Julia noticed some skulls in an anteroom beyond the main room. It was quite alarming.

"How did these get here?" Charles gasped.

"I don't know," Albert said with a puzzled look.

"So I guess we are not the first to enter the vault," Emily judged.

"It is likely these were prisoners," Albert tried to be logical.

"But how could they have entered and not get out," Charles further speculated. "It seems like they were trapped."

"We will have to make an inquiry on that later," Albert reconciled. "For now, we should head back to high ground and we can speculate further."

The team went out, a little fazed by the encounter. They could not make sense of the human remains and the ominous warning. They were also shaken by the death of one of the workers who had slipped and fell. It all seemed to suggest a terrible

curse. Could they be the subject of the Mayan's wrath? Before exiting, Emily had noticed a strange pattern on the door. It seemed to resemble a compass but it was in reverse. It seemed strange to her and she was jarred by it. They returned to their huts later that evening.

That night they dined on local fish fare and seafood that was the compliment of locals who lived along the jungle border. It was quite delectable and very natural. There was squid from the fresh waters of the nearby ocean, cod that was exquisitely prepared, shrimp that was larger than they had ever seen, and all kinds of side-dishes like cornmeal and guacamole, herring and tripe. It gave them a sense of the Mayan culture and that the Mayan spirit still lived on in the food and culture of their descendants. Charles spoke to one of the priests who was in attendance who revealed some interesting facts about the temple of the bridegroom.

"The temple has been sought after by many explorers," he said reminiscently. "This is very propitious that it has finally been located. We are rejoicing but we know the risks."

"Risks?" Charles asked.

"Yes risks," the old chief replied. "You see the Mayans were very proud people. They built the temple to honor their Gods and used it as a sacred place. It was usurped by the king and subsequently, used for his own debauchery and evil acts. So it became cursed just like a black cat. The Mayans started dying and many generations fell sick due to the king's cruelty. Innocent villagers were sometimes sacrificed for the king's own devious pleasure. So it became a bloodletting and the blood of many Mayans smeared the gates of the temple and became its evil eye. Other priests sometimes, prayed over the images of the Gods to try to dispel the evil spirits. But nothing worked. The king was incessant and continued to punish his subjects. Eventually, the temple became known as the Dark Place- la Negra Lugar. People were frightened to go close to it and eventually it became isolated and abandoned. Even the king fell victim to its loathness and was assassinated inside his own palace bedroom. From then on, it was looted and pillaged and many of the looters became trapped and never returned. Their cries can still be heard in the forests and trees. So it is very foreboding and the return of the Temple to this kingdom can be detrimental. However, many Mayans still believe that the curse can be lifted if simply by the good acts of white men who might restore its past glory."

"But how?" Charles asked intently.

"By setting right the clock of the Mayans," the chief pronounced.

"What does that mean?"

"To redeem the lost souls, the temple must be returned to its original status- as a sanctuary."

“How do we do that?”

“I am not sure,” the Chief replied. “But in our folklore, only the white man can do this since he is not part of the ancient feud.”

“Interesting,” Charles replied.

They celebrated throughout the night with dancing and revelry and even joined in the chanting and hopping that was part of the Mayan culture. It seemed like a pack of wolves howling to the moon. A bonfire crackled in their midst and created a romantic atmosphere. The cool air passed through the jungle's great canopy like a refreshing breath. The women and men honored the family with garlands and the entire hut was festooned with flowers and bouquets. It was a real celebration in honor of their coming and their discoveries. A pig was cooked in an open pit and its smoke rose in a plume in the blue mist. Even wine was offered that was homemade and had its own spellbinding affect. Julia played hopscotch with the other kids and played a game with a lasso where a rope was used to reel in other kids. Later, they retired to their hut and were so tired that they didn't even bother to undress and went to sleep in their civilian clothes.

The next morning, Charles was greeted by Diego and some of the other researchers who were heading over to the Devil's peak to look at stone carvings. Since Charles was an expert at Mayan hieroglyphics perhaps he could make out the meaning. The stone carvings were done by Mayans who were persecuted and dwelled in the mountain ranges and subsisted on their own. The trek in the jeep was bumpy and long but they cruised up the mountain side in good fashion. It was scenic and breathtaking as they rode along the ridge overlooking the great valley and the coastline where the ocean met the shore in spectacular waves. It was a mix of blue and green blending together in a natural hue. There was no other place quite like this. They reached the top and parked their fleet in a dry spot overlooking the steppe. The team made their way down a slope and through a wheat field before reaching the ancient quarry. There they saw the remains of a hidden city that had now been entirely ravaged by weather and landslides. Among it, were the intricate stone carvings that had survived due to their position- they were facing away from the wind and rain. Charles snapped some photos. Diego walked over and analyzed the script.

“They are certainly original,” he said.

Charles examined the letters, symbols and shapes with his expert eye. They were fascinating unlike any he had ever seen. They were detailed and done with artistic precision. It was clear to him that these were sacred and had profound meaning. They were also wrapped in mystery and secrecy since nothing seemed chronological. The entire history was out of place from the beginning of the Mayan kingdom, and the first inhabitants coming on canoes, to the heyday of the kingdom when everything was thriving, to the Great Fire that ravaged most of the kingdom

and the erection of the first temple. It was this that Charles was most concerned with.

"What do you think it could mean?" one of the fellow hikers promptly asked.

"It's a history," Charles answered decisively. "But it is all out of order. Like they do not acknowledge a beginning and end and that the civilization stands still in the space of time."

"Interesting," Diego surmised. "What else?"

"Since these people were persecuted they did not believe they were entitled to such harsh treatment," Charles deduced. "They believed they had a rightful claim over the land and possessions. However, they were scorned by the king and banished."

He pointed to a particular engraving.

"You see here," he said. "This is when they were thrown out. You can see the king's officers leading them out of the kingdom with yokes and chains."

"They were known as the Guapos," Diego said. "Or the forgotten people. They were despised by the king due to a bloodline."

"That explains a lot," Charles said pricking up.

"What happened to them?" a second man ventured.

"It seems that an illness overtook them," Charles said. "Like a plague that made them gaunt and boney."

"Does it say anything else?" Diego asked.

"Well, they blamed the king for stealing their possessions," Charles went on. "They believed that some of their family heirlooms were kept locked up in the temple when the temple was built. Many of them were executed as a sadistic joke. From then on, a grave spirit haunted the temple that is still searching for its missing gold."

It was quite staggering. To think of such a harrowing account gave them shudders. But at the same time, the discovery of such an important living history was epic. It could literally change the outlook on Mayan history and recall a kingdom that had its hard luck citizens. Could it divulge a greater meaning behind the Mayan society and finally reveal its wonders and secrets- its unknown customs and harsh practices. Or could it mean a purified kingdom that was built on a hierarchy and shunned the lower classes. It was all part of a mosaic.

Charles focused in on one of the stories.

“This here shows a pit inside the temple where some of the Gaupos perished,” Charles said. “It is part of the subterranean tunnels that lurks underneath the palace. It is said here that only the counterclockwise movement of the sun can lay it bare and that the king bears the only key to activate it.”

They were confused and thought maybe, that the king possessed special powers, magic or spells to cause such events to occur. Like Moses or Pharaoh in ancient times who possessed supernatural powers to amaze and transfix. Could the king have had such special powers to control the stars, the moon and the sky? Was he like a Supreme Being who was endowed with gifts and raised Cain? It could not be entirely known but it jarred the mind and made them breathless. If surely the Mayans were a great people, they had a special connection to the supernatural world that could be unexplained.

Afterward, they went to the Eagle’s Nest to spy on this ancient mystical outpost. It was located at the far side of the mountain overlooking the coastline and it was majestic and supreme. It seemed like a perennial watchtower from where the great eagle viewed its territory. Long since kept out of view by thick jungle it was finally revealed when a bulldozer almost went over the edge and uncovered this rock-hewn wonder. Approaching it, you could see its tail whooped up in a raised position while the eagle crouched over the edge in a stealth-like way. Its claws clenching the boulders on which it was firmly attached. The Mayans looked towards this majestic creature for guidance and protection. Now it was once more divulged in its naked beauty and form.

The head curator explained its significance.

“We now know that the eagle is situated at a point that corresponds to the three pyramids and temple,” he said. “It is meant to signify a pattern just like the constellations in the sky. The eagle at the focal point, the two pyramids at the base, and the temple and the final pyramid representing the position of the North Star and Comet Haley. They observed this comet long ago and saw it as a second coming of the Chosen One, a Great Leader to raise up the Mayan people, and marked the location. The eagle also has a significance since it is an embodiment of the Chosen One. We are very thrilled to finally be able to fit everything together.”

Charles was titillated and could not help but see a connection among the ruins and the Eagles Nest as a proxy for more hidden secrets and meaning. They stood at the foot of the structure and marveled at it. Charles took photos to show to Emily and Julia who had remained behind. The eagle’s eye seemed to pierce his soul. It seemed alive even after thousands of years and awakened like a great bird who was ready for its dominion.

Around its neck was a key that was thought-provoking.

“Is there a significance to the key?” Charles asked.

"It is meant to signify the keys to open the gateway to the kingdom," one of the cohorts replied. "So no one could claim the keys for themselves, it hung around the bird's neck."

"Fascinating," Charles murmured.

It all made sense and standing high above the ridge, it was apparent that there was deep meaning to the civilization, that it was advanced beyond its years, that it represented a scientific mind, and the Mayans were not just hunter gatherers. There was a method and system that they espoused and recreated among their civilization to a great extent and went over and above to execute its design. It was a marvelous codification that if studied more could reveal even more insightful clues and theories on the origins of mankind. How the Maya lived could shed light on the evolution of modern man or perhaps, even a missing link.

They returned to the camp by sunset, traveling down the winding road in a kind of a tailspin with dust kicking up everywhere in the afterglow of the sun. They were weary from the long trek but in high spirits and enthused. They had conquered a vast span of the Mayan territory and it was notable. Charles had plenty of facts to advance his research. He gave Diego the photos to develop them, and the next morning, at breakfast, Diego laid them out before the family. They were captivated and hypnotized by the shots. They seemed larger-than-life and were very vivid. Julia was amazed by the eagle and its angles and drawn by its power. Emily seemed to pore over the hieroglyphics and the detailed images that would likely be published in a cover article. She was proud of Charles' for his fine work.

"What is the significance of this one?" she asked pointing at one of the portrayals of the Lost tribe.

"It simply shows the bartering system," Charles stated. "They were a society based on a barter system. However, the king imposed taxes and it led to feuds and wars with opposing tribes. Here one of the leaders of the exiled tribe is executed and a subsequent revenge killing shows one of the soldiers being slayed with a spear. It continued on like this for centuries when finally plague overtook them and the rivalry was lost to the passage of time."

It was a fascinating history and Emily did not fail to notice that the temple was depicted in many images and that it could be a source of all the enmity and arousal and could have a wicked place in the history of the empire. Perhaps, their discoveries were also unmasking long held secrets that were now coming to light. It could be said that their meddling could perhaps, even disturb restless spirits that would bring misfortune. But as a scientist and professional, she had to shun all superstitions for the sake of truth. She simply delighted in the exposure and phenomena.

In his room, Charles compared the key that they found in the Monk's chest to his papers and reference books. He laid out the books on a table. He wanted to know if there was any record of such a key in prior studies. In a manual of Mayan artifacts, published in the 1800's by a Scottish explorer named Ferdinand Franz, he noticed a similar key that was discovered in a prior excavation of ruins near the banks of the Oryx river. This key was believed to have been a spiritual insignia worn around the neck of one of the chieftains to signify access to a spiritual realm. It seemed like a fascinating similitude. Charles observed the key in the manuscript. It seemed identical to the one in his hands. Why would there be two keys he wondered. Below the photograph, the caption read: "The key of the Holy Apostle. It must be worn by the Caretaker of the Two Realms. It shall grant passage to the other side. Let it not fall into the wrong hands." It made Charles shudder. He wondered if the key was a twin or a replica.

Later, he and Diego visited a local artisan to inquire about the key. The man was an old Mayan descendant who had lived along the outskirts of the jungle for some time. He traced his lineage to the ancient Mayans and resembled them. He had long hair that ran down to his waist in two braids and an acrylic robe that was patterned by a master weaver. He looked austere and dignified.

"Can you tell us anything about the key?" Diego asked timidly.

The artisan observed it in his hands.

"Remarkable," he commented.

"Can you tell us anything about it?" Diego inquired innocently.

"Not much," the artisan sighed. "This is a fabrication."

"A fabrication?" Diego repeated.

"Yes," the artisan replied. "It is a fabrication of the real key that belonged to the king as a subterfuge."

"A subterfuge," Diego blinked.

"Yes, a subterfuge."

"What do you mean?" Charles asked.

"It was kept by the monks as a defense," the priest disclosed. "It was meant to preserve the natural state of the kingdom in the face of the king's tyranny. It was a symbol of the priest's independence. It was to be kept around the neck of the highest priest in order to deter evil spells. When someone got sick, or there was some ill misfortune, the key would be used to call upon the forces of good. It was also meant as a safeguard against the king's incursions."

"How so?" Diego asked.

"The Mayans believed in two worlds," the chieftain explained. "This one where we live and a spiritual realm that exists beyond ourselves. They believed that this life was just a fragment of an Eternal life. That the purpose of the Mayans was to carry out a spiritual purpose and return to the other realm. The key represented a connection between those two worlds."

"Can it be used like a real key?" Charles asked.

"It had no real practical use of course," the priest explained. "There is no actual door where it can be used. It was only meant to signify a link between kingdoms. By having the key, the Mayans were reminded of their Ultimate return to the spiritual realm."

"Is there anything else?" Charles asked.

"Only that if it fell into the wrong hands, it could mean disaster or an impending doom," the priest warned. "Or the downfall of the entire kingdom. But it is mere superstition and of course, by now, the key is but a relic only signifying a glorified past. It has no real purpose and the secret door has long since been closed. I'm sure it is safe for scientific research."

Charles and Diego nodded. They were satisfied with the legend of the key. Perhaps, its significance was locked away in the secret annals of Mayan lore. Perhaps, it was simply a red herring. Whatever the case, it shed light on the mentality and frame of mind of these people. Were they real spiritualists tied to an afterlife beyond this world? Or did they in fact, descend from another world altogether, as many proclaimed. It was staggering to think about. They thanked the priest and departed with the customary farewell of bowing and saluting that was reciprocated.

Their driver Sanchez had arranged for an afternoon safari. They mounted the jeep and rode along the wide stretch of road that traversed the jungle and went in and out of the thick cover and brush. They saw a large number of exotic species like muskrat, tamarins and condor. They even saw a jaguar perched atop a tree in midday repose who only woke up briefly to give them a cold stare. The jungle was full of curiosities and boasted a multitude of plants and animal species. Thick palms covered most of the jungle expanse and coconut trees and birch were among the most rampant. The rest of the jungle was covered with stalks and eucalyptus trees and a sweet fragrance seemed to fill the air. There was a partial desert where the Mexican plateau met the jungle at a convex and the rest of the lowlands were vast cornfields that seemed to resemble gold dust. It was clear that the Mayan home was not merely a jungle habitat but a diverse place with many shades and colors. Sanchez pointed out most of the notable places. When they passed a sprawling lake where throngs of flamingoes were gathered, Sanchez pulled over and related an odd legend.

"This is known as the Great Lagoon," Sanchez said. "It is known as the life source for the entire city. The Mayans believed the waters to be sacred and that it was destined for them. However, when the king began his persecution, it is said that the waters turned red and that God was angry with him. And the prayers of monks who worshipped near this site caused the Lake to be filled with the blood of martyrs. So the king shunned it as a trick or cunning of the monks. He persecuted them and had them arrested. However, an image appeared over the Lagoon one day depicting an angel with wings. It said to be the archangel himself or the Nazarene who they call Jesus. The people prayed to this image and the king was struck with a fever and could no longer rule. He was subsequently replaced and the persecution stopped for some time. Now it is just an ordinary lake but it was a great symbol in its heyday."

It made everyone pause and consider such a legend. The lagoon stood out before them like a blue azure, silent and motionless, unable to recount its own fabled past. But it was clear that it was once a legendary place and harbored secrets that only the Mayans could have known. Charles wondered if there was any significance to the location of the city to the lagoon.

"Indeed," Sanchez replied. "It provided a form of irrigation to the city. The water was diverted through tributaries to all the major parts of the city and gave it its vitality. So it was central to the life and subsistence. It is also responsible for the city's growth and prosperity. However, when the king learned of the monk's treachery he cut off the tributaries and supply of water to the villages. If the villagers protested they were decapitated or hanged. But one particular monk had a gold shield that caused the rivers to flood, the dams to burst or the tributaries to flow backwards to counter the king's commands. So it was always a stalemate."

It seemed far-fetched and unfathomable.

"This shield," Charles asked. "Was it ever found?"

"Unfortunately, no," Sanchez replied. "No one knows what happened to it or if it was lost or stolen by the ravages of time. However, early texts reveal that it did exist and belonged to the priests who used it to ward off spells and omens. It had been dipped in gold and bore some kind of cosmic decree that foretold of the Mayan civilization. No one knows its true origins but it is believed that it was not from this world. Perhaps, if it was ever found, the civilization could be reborn again but it is just fantasy."

"Cosmic decree?" Emily asked with great interest. "What could that be?"

Sanchez momentarily paused. He seemed to have no answer but began again.

"The cosmic decree was a message from the beyond. It was written in foreign letters but was translated to mean "the Maya is your mother" and it became the fundamental teaching that all Mayans believed. They relied on it for their daily

guidance. It was a fundamental principle. Thus, the shield was used to ward off aggressors."

"Seems divine," Emily conceived.

"Perhaps, we can finish up and see some of the plains before heading back?" Charles mentioned.

In waves, the flamingoes flapped away and were no longer seen. The lagoon lay restful in their wake (or the silent monotony of the afternoon). The party proceeded to the outstretched plains where a final ride offered them an open view of the entire countryside and gave them a sense of the scale. The wisdom of the ages seemed to come alive and a harmonious balance seemed to prevail. They passed some strange ruins where pillars were scattered and tipped over and marked a barren field. According to Sanchez, this was a spiritual retreat long visited by the Mayans to seek help from the Gods. However, it had fallen to the ravages of time and the old customs had been lost. It seemed like an esoteric vision.

They wrapped up the tour and headed back to the cabin for a night of rest. Tomorrow, they would head out to the temple to finish the rest of the excavations. Everything was beginning to come together in a larger way. The entire makeup of the Mayan civilization was beginning to make sense. Everything had a purpose and an origin and fit together like a puzzle. The city was beginning to open up its mysteries and reveal a hidden world beneath the surface. The temples of the kings were no longer obscure but seemed to have ties to the sprawling city and its environs. It seemed like the outstretched wings of the phoenix could be traced beneath the sand. It was only a matter of time that it would soar once again. Could it be possible?

The next day, the family rode back to Illago to explore the ruins further. It was a scenic location and perfect for a day of repose since it was a Sunday. They took a leisurely trip up to the hills in the wrangler and took in the atmosphere. It was serene and tranquil and the climate was agreeable. They passed a giant sculpture along one of the roads that resembled a lion's head. It was severed from its pillar and had fallen in a pit. The head had been cracked and the lion was disfigured like a hunter's prey. Its one eye gleamed at them as if it was peering into the soul, while the other drooped from the fall. It seemed like a token of the past that was still a symbol of great austerity and pride. It was likely placed to greet visitors or detract intruders. They rode on until they reached the hills that seemed to lie furtive and silent in the golden sun. A golden arch seemed to hug the outline like a halo. It was surreal and captivating. Diego parked the jeep near a patch of rosemary bushes and sage. It seemed enchanting like a Shakespeare sonnet. They ventured into the plot where the ruins stood and admired the myriad buildings and structures. They walked past a public bath, where the Mayan women likely bathed with their children, a cemetery where gravestones marked the resting place of locals and

priests, and a barn where they kept livestock. It seemed like a subsistence lifestyle that kept the Mayan society functioning. It was quite the sharp contrast from the king's palaces and splendor and bespoke the true essence of Mayan life. They went up to a crest and laid out a blanket. It gave a perfect view of the valley below and the cliff's edge was an idyllic spot. A cherry blossom stood on the edge and its leaves swirled in the wind. The family partook of a country meal- homemade American fare- fried chicken, biscuits, macaroni and mashed potatoes. It was to commemorate their own birth land amidst a foreign landscape. It felt good to feel like home.

"It's quite a pretty view," Charles remarked.

"Indeed," Diego replied. "For years all this was condemned and now it is coming back to life."

"So what happened here?" Charles asked.

"Well, the king was very opposed to the priests and there was a bitter feud," Diego explained. "They were constantly at odds and one day the king sent assassins to do away with the high priest to unify the rule."

"Interesting," Charles quipped.

"But the attempt failed and there was a war. The king prevailed and the monks were taken into captivity. The king feared that a mass rebellion could break out so he had them imprisoned and stripped of their duties."

"What happened after that?"

"Well, the people rebelled and broke away from the kingdom. They wanted their own rights and the kingdom was divided. The high priest controlled the steppe and the king the lower plains. Finally, it came to a head on the plains in a bitter battle and thousands were slain. However, the king never regained rule over the local polity and the working class created their own republic. However, throughout the years, it was threatened by the king's armies and there was never a safe harbor. Finally, one of the priests killed himself in a type of hara-kiri to protest and it was said that his soul transfigured and he was seen crossing into the After-life. It is said that on certain nights, a constellation can be seen that resembles the priest's headdress and passage into the supernatural realm."

Charles was bewitched by the entire story. They ate dessert and Emily laid back and read a book while Charles and Diego strolled, and Julia played with some tacks. The weather was serene and calm. A wind was blowing. They walked among the ruins admiring the stone monuments and relics. It was quite astonishing to conceive a civilization in its heyday. A couple of crows flew overhead and perched atop a willow. They seemed at home in this wild country. Diego gathered some firewood and they lit a bonfire as the sun began to fall over the horizon. Its flames fanned in

the wind, sparkling and crackling, and spreading a warm light. It was poetic and philosophical. An entire ocean of wisdom lay before them and they were at one with the land and country. It was as if the old World had come alive. The ruins had been resurrected and once more people were walking to and fro, women tending to their gardens, smiths working in their shops, priests in elegant commanding masses, and workers tilling to the land. Children clung to their mothers with love and affection that was inherent to the Mayan society. Everything had a natural flow.

Late at night, Charles studied the ancient texts and manuscripts for clues about the old Kingdom. There was something mysterious and uncanny about this ancient and bygone civilization. There was a sense of irony in the layout of the temples and pyramids and everything had a strange kinship. He wondered if there was some kind of a rationale or meaning. He compared a map of the city and analyzed it. It seemed like all the structures were at an equidistant to one another. It seemed uncanny as if they had perfect alignment. He remembered the astrolabe. Could it be possible that the entire grid resembled the canopy in the sky? He pulled out a map of the night sky that was dotted with the constellations. He laid it over the grid of the city and sized it all up. Slowly, the landmarks began to fall in line with the constellations underneath the filament paper. It was a moment of sheer epiphany. The city was in fact, built on the shape and design of the constellations- the temple at the apex of the Calisto, the pyramid at the center of the Big Dipper, and the Eagle's nest at the point of the north star. It was a fascinating revelation and shocking discovery. Why had the Mayans used the cosmic map to build their civilization? What was the purpose? Charles was struck with a sense of amazement. He continued to read the history. In one of the passages, he read about the Cosmic Shield. It was indeed true. Historians had documented an ancient artifact like a shield that protected the kingdom. "A cosmic shield was used to stave off the king's armies. It had a great power and could cause supernatural events. It was a symbol of the Mayan's descent from the heavens." Could this legend be possibly true? It seemed to confirm Sanchez' story. Charles was baffled and bowed. It also mentioned a Solar year when all the constellations would be perfectly aligned with the structures and cause a massive ascent to the heavens. Such a solar year could explain the disappearance of an entire caste. Could this event have truly occurred and the lost tribes had ascended into the high heavens never to return. The constellations seemed to suggest such a legend but could an extinction of an entire race be justified. The fact remained- could this ancient peoples have come from another world and created an advanced civilization only to return later to their own planet. It was a chilling thought.

At that moment, Diego walked in and seemed frantic. Apparently, there had been another accident. This time in the mines where one of the search team had perished. The mines were a network of tunnels underneath the pyramids that the Mayans used for travel, lodge and storekeeping. However, during one of the excavations, a trap door had caused a fall and one of the explorers had met their

fate. It was startling to think about and the prospects of excavation seemed even riskier. They would have to be on their toes. Charles was asked to come down to identify the fallen man. The man was an American traveler and it would be easier to use a fellow citizen. Charles agreed and was happy to comply in any way. The next morning, they headed off to the mines anticipating a somber mood.

They entered the pyramid at Coaxl and were led down to the lower depths with the help of a guide. It was musty and smelled of a white powder and chalk. They felt like dwarfs inside a great mountain. The massive temple stood over an intricate tunnel system that was prodigious. The magnitude of the space and area was staggering and the halls were filled with accoutrements and archaeological trappings. Ladders and scaffolds covered the area since every aspect of the mines was inspected such as the rock and walls, carvings and slabs. It was a massive operation. They were led on to a large opening that was filled with statues and sculptures of Mayan origin. They had been perfectly preserved for centuries beneath the surface. No doubt this would bring fame to their expedition. They ventured on and traveled through a series of tunnels and rooms and finally reached the site where the worker had been killed. It was a darkly lit chamber with a curved wall and strange steps that were crisscrossed. Near the curved wall, were a series of blocks that seemed to suggest a sequence. It was one of these blocks that was pressed that had caused the trap door to open and the worker to fall. The trap was a series of moving blocks that may cause imbalance. The worker had lost his grip and had fallen through one of the cracks and was crushed between the sliding walls. It was a reminiscent of an Arabian cult. Charles examined the configuration closely. He looked around and noticed twin rooms adjacent to the main room. They seemed like storerooms. He noticed some inscriptions at the entrance. It read: "Here lies the treasures of the Mayas to be guarded by the Chosen One." Inside, the rooms were empty and dark as if they had been cleaned out. It seemed remarkable since no one had ever entered these rooms before. It seemed like foul play.

They later identified the body and Charles recognized the man to be John Maloney, a fellow historian who was an expert on Mayan artifacts. He lamented over the passing. Later they met Albert at the top level who was supervising the mining operations. Albert was directing some of the workers who were atop ladders and brushing off the tops of the brick and mortar. They greeted him and Charles was eager to know the circumstances of the fall.

"Well hello," Albert turned and addressed them. He had a cigar in his hand.

"Well hello to you," Charles replied. "How are the operations going?"

"Fine," Albert hummed. "Everything is on track. Soon we will be able to uncover most of the frescoes."

"Quite stunning," Charles marveled at the scope of the work.

"So how was your walk?" Albert asked.

"Fine," Charles said. "It is marvelous."

"Yes indeed," Albert said puffing up. "It is quite a discovery."

"We are sorry to hear about the accident," Charles said with grimness.

"It was truly tragic," Albert acknowledged. "It shouldn't have happened."

"So how did it happen?" Charles asked.

"The man had entered the vault on his own and succumbed to the hidden trap," Albert recounted. "We simply did not have any way to save him."

"What was this vault?" Charles asked.

Albert paused as if the question stumped him. "It was simply a vault that was used for collection purposes."

"Collection purposes?" Charles asked.

"Yes," Albert replied flickering ashes from his cigar on the ground. "For the king's collections."

"Was it empty?" Charles asked.

Albert gave him a blank look as if the question was too inquisitive. "Yes," he replied with a startling look. "We never recovered anything."

"Why do you think?" Charles asked.

"Likely, the king would have moved all the gold to his private chambers," Albert theorized.

"So it could not be looters?" Charles questioned further.

This startled Albert even more since the mines were closed and completely blocked from intruders.

"Of course not," Albert retorted. "Looting would have been impossible."

Charles was baffled by the explanation and seemed dubious of Albert's intentions.

"How was the sequence even deciphered," he finally asked with suspicion.

Albert paused a moment. He took a few puffs of his cigar that mixed with the mustiness. "Likely he tried a few combinations and it worked."

Charles was skeptical and did not seem to believe the story. For the first time, he was leery of Albert. It seemed that he was being disingenuous. They parted with a cordial goodbye, but Albert seemed sinister, watching them walk off, with the cigar twirling in his mouth, and cross-eyes as if he was contemplating a payback.

Later at the house, Charles and Diego sat by the fireplace and pondered Albert's account. It did not seem likely. There was no way Maloney could have known the sequence. Something seemed awry. Since the mines were closed off, no one could have known the combination, besides someone who was in charge. Could it have been Albert who ordered the assassination? They mulled over the question. Charles was bothered by the whole affair.

"It would be quite impossible for someone to know the sequence," Charles posed.

Diego went out and came back with a briefcase. He had surreptitiously taken it from Albert's convoy. They were mostly drawings and sketches that were pre-modern and fabricated. Could something be a clue to the worker's demise? He identified one of the drawings that showed a curved room. It had a legend on the bottom where certain symbols represented pictures and shapes. They laid the map over a table and examined it closely. Charles moved a magnifying glass over the inscription. The shapes corresponded to the symbols and spelled out a name "Quinta". This was the ancient Mayan word for "abode". It was also the same word as the sequence. This meant that historic records and transcriptions that were found in Albert's briefcase matched the sequence in the room. It was not a categorical proof but it did show Albert had been disingenuous. He must've known about the sequence beforehand.

"It seems that he lied to us," Charles garbled.

"It seems that way," Diego agreed.

"But why?"

"He wanted to keep it from us."

"But what was his reason?"

"Perhaps, he didn't want us to think there was any danger?"

"But why keep us hanging?"

"I don't know."

"Or maybe it was a conspiracy?" Charles posed.

"If he knew the sequence why would he use it?"

"I'm not sure," Charles replied. "But it's possible that the vault contained something that Albert did not want the world to know."

"Like what?"

"A treasure."

"So why would he keep it from us?"

"I don't know. But it looks like he wanted to get rid of anyone who stood in his way."

"Are you sure?"

"Not really. But I think there is more to this story and this is just a canard."

The king's palace was a sprawling estate beyond the ordinary outline of the city and lay on many acres of flat land. It was a palatial retreat and featured a large mansion that was constructed of ivory, bathhouses, a barracks for the king's officers, a ranch for taming horses and a garden maze. It was a beautiful sight and was the sole habitat of the king when he was not at the temple grounds officiating. The estate was dreamlike with the white marble palace in the background and the prairie in the foreground. Emily and Julia had taken a ride with Sanchez for a day of outing and retreat. They had stopped at the foot of the palace and were left alone to roam and explore. Sanchez waited in a pasture and spent the day while the girls did their exploring. The palace was an austere place and grandiose with prodigious steps, an esplanade that went around the entire structure, large rooms and halls, hanging gardens and huge spires. They walked around and sensed a feeling of grandness and authority. Everything seemed large and opulent. They knew they were in the presence of a royal court and could envision large gatherings, ceremonies, tributes and festivals and gatherings. They pictured a scene of adornment and celebrations where the king was honored and perhaps, jousts beyond the palace grounds, where knights engaged in feats of honor. It was wondrous to relive the scenes of opulence and splendor. They admired the fountains that were situated at various points and had been dried out but pictured the flutes where running water gushed forth. They were now simply full of rain water with lilies floating on the surface like ponds. They saw rabbits scurrying about in the overgrown grass and smiled at their appearance. They were white as snow on Everest. Emily picked wild flowers and made a bouquet. In it were roses, sunflowers, geranium, and magnolias. They were pretty like a girl's dress on a summer day. They walked along the outer edge that was meant to be a moat and was now dried out. It was only a mere outline that was now packed with mud and earth and seemed faded. But they knew it existed and protected the palace since the king was highly guarded. A crane appeared in the distance near one of the ponds and was wading and motionless like an angelic bird. Sparrows flew overhead in erratic fashion and spread out over the terrain. The stables were distant and abandoned and from afar looked like empty hangars that were long forgotten. Beyond, were the racetracks and open fields, where the horses

were trained and fitted for races. It seemed too much to conceive. After exploring the breadth of the castle, they continued to the garden maze that lay outside and was verdant and still standing in its original form. The walls and partitions were still intact and crisscrossed like a labyrinth. They took the chance to explore it and would leave a trail of petals in case they lost their way. The maze was dreamy and lifelike. It had many corners and roadblocks but Emily and Julia seemed to find their way in and out of the paths and trails. The idea was to reach the center which was like the end. Thick brush and thorny hedges seemed to grow from the walls and the maze was lush with vines and ample leaves. It was blooming despite centuries of neglect and it seemed formed on an eternal substrata. Walking in it seemed to be humbling. Birds whistled nearby and butterflies fluttered and danced like a ballet. The humid air also attracted humming bees that buzzed about and landed on pollen. The two merry maidens were in a land of enchantment. Finally, they reached a corridor that opened up to the garden's inner core. They were thrilled. As they walked towards the marble fountain that rested at the center that was meant to be the anchor, they saw Albert leisurely waiting in the heart of the labyrinth. It was astounding.

"How do you do?" Albert called out to them.

"Fine thank you," Emily replied. "We were just admiring the scenery."

"Marvelous, isn't it," Albert commented.

"Yes indeed," Emily replied.

"Did you see the palace?" Albert asked.

"Yes indeed," Emily replied. "We walked around for a bit. It is quite large. Emily picked flowers. It's been a marvelous day."

"Nice to hear," Albert smiled.

"So what brought you here?" Emily asked.

"Well, I was just musing that's all," Albert replied. "Sort of reliving the king's musings. This was his place of meditation."

"It is quite peaceful," Emily agreed.

"It was built by the king for his wife," Albert conveyed. "It was a symbol of love and affection. It was his wife's practice to visit the labyrinth and take walks and have some privacy."

"How splendid," Emily exclaimed.

"The labyrinth also had a practical use," Albert went on. "It was a great defense against marauders and trespassers. If they were caught, they would be killed inside the walls."

"We surmised as much," Emily replied.

"The labyrinth also is built on an axis," Albert suggested.

"An axis," Emily asked.

"Yes, an axis," Albert repeated. "Basically, its shape and design is meant to resemble the constellation Orion and where we're standing right now is right below the Pole Star. In fact, if you look westward, you will notice the sun's travel is directly in line with the circular arc of the fountain and thus was used for navigating. It ensured that someone could not get lost."

"Fascinating," Emily said.

"The king killed off anyone who had knowledge of it," Albert explained. "Thus the secret was kept safe."

There was a pause.

"On the other side, is a crypt that was used as a burial for all trespassers," Albert mentioned tangentially. "Would you like to see it?"

They agreed and walked through a few corridors to where the labyrinth opened up to a potter's field. They were unmarked gravestones and burial plots that seemed in descript. It was shaded by trees and oaks and secluded and hidden. They followed Albert further until they reached a deeper part of the crypt whereupon the sight of one of Albert's men startled both Emily and Julia. He was putrid and was lying against a tree. It was a morbid scene.

"Unfortunately, this man was killed after a night of drinking," Albert explained. "He was stabbed by a knife and we brought him here to bury him."

Emily and Julia were noticeably shaken. They did not expect a dead body. They were stirred. Albert tried to calm them but seemed withdrawn.

"Sometimes, when men don't listen to simple instructions, things like this happen," he scoffed. "It need not worry you since you are quite obedient."

It seemed like a warning. Was Albert suggesting that bad things could happen if men fell out of line? Was this a random murder or a personal vendetta? They could not know his full intentions but at that moment, Albert seemed like a treacherous figure.

"We will bury him here," Albert continued on. "It is only appropriate and perhaps, it might honor the king's legacy since this man had not been loyal."

It was a shocking statement and Emily and Julia asked to take leave and return to their car. They insisted they were tired after a long day and it would be better if they returned. Albert was agreeable to their wish. They departed and Albert looked out at them skeptically as if he did not trust them.

Emily made cocoa and they all sat around the sitting room with steaming cups. It felt good to have some relaxation and repose. It was a fair night. The moonlight seemed to make everything romanticized. The night sky was full of stars and when you looked out they appeared like studs on a dress. The peaks of the Mayan structures could be seen in silhouette in the moonlight. They seemed like battle armaments with sharp peaks and points and inscribed the landscape like an eternal flame. An owl could be heard in the distance and the sound of crickets filled the air. It was a typical Mayan night akin to the old days when the color of the night took over the senses. It seemed like a safe haven despite all the risks and pitfalls. Charles read a book about Cosmology and Diego organized some books on the shelf.

"How was your day?" Charles asked Emily.

"Fine dear," Emily replied. "It was a decent trip."

Charles sensed something off in her tone.

"Was there anything else?" he asked.

"Well, we saw Albert there."

"Is that so?" What was he doing there?"

"He was standing in the maze."

"What was he doing?"

"He was simply taking in the view."

"Is that so? Was there anything else?"

"Well, he showed us a burial plot?"

"What was it?"

"Well, it was a private cemetery."

"Is that so?"

"But there was something else."

"Like what?"

"There was a body there."

Charles became intrigued.

"A body?"

"Yes a body. It was one of the bodyguards. He had been killed in a fight."

"What was he doing there?"

"They had placed him there to be buried. It was quite heinous dear."

"My god. What did Albert say?"

"Well, he said it was tragic that someone should die. But something seemed off."

"What do you mean?"

"His demeanor. Albert did not seem sorry."

It seemed to confirm Charles's view of Albert that was beginning to grow in his mind of someone who was notorious. This was a second instance of a death that was inexplicable and could not be downplayed. He was concerned for Emily and Julia. It seemed that Albert was not telling them everything. That there was something lurking beneath the surface. They discussed the other events- the tragic accident in the mines- the worker falling and being killed at the temple. It seemed to add up to some kind of a cover-up. Charles urged Emily and Julia to be careful and leery. If something was afoot, they needed to be alert. They could not trust Albert. But at the same time, they could not point fingers. He was still in charge and a man of respect and esteem. They did not have undeniable proof of anything yet and could not be totally convinced.

Diego mentioned the papers that he had swiped. They seemed to show Albert's involvement in the crime. However, it was still conjecture and none of it could be proven. Some of the papers seemed to suggest substantial riches that could be located inside one of the temples. They were amassed during the king's lifetime and passed down for generations. It was moved into the tunnel system over time and kept hidden in an underground vault. Diego pointed to a colored drawing that indicated a vast horde in one of the hidden chambers.

"Right here," Diego pointed. "It suggests that a vast horde could exist and was highly coveted."

"Do you really think it could still exist," Emily asked.

"Nothing was ever recovered," Diego admitted. "So it is possible that it could still exist."

“But how come it was never found?”

Diego pointed to the illustration more closely. “According to this, men have perished trying to attain it.”

“So it is untouchable?”

“Perhaps.”

“Do you think Albert might be looking for it?”

“It’s a possibility. And perhaps, in his search, he is taking out anyone who might be privy to his plan.”

They all looked at each other in consternation. It was quite possible Albert may be out for personal gain and the secret papers seemed to suggest some underlying motive. A secret horde could possibly be leading a treacherous plot. It also seemed to explain the reason for the deaths and accidents. But one thing was certain- that Albert had not discovered the horde yet or they could be victims also. Or he was innocent and simply leading an official excavation. Too many coincidences were adding up and the family was on notice. Could they have walked into a sinister plot by a double-dealing Albert and were now in harm’s way? Was their innocent voyage to the Mayan empire now smeared by murder and deceit? Things were beginning to seem more perilous and they would have to use more caution.

“One more thing,” Diego claimed.

“What is it?” Charles asked.

“I don’t think it will be that easy for anyone to get their hands on the gold.”

“Why is that?”

“Cuidado con el oro que es sagrado,” Diego recited. “Beware the gold that is sacred.”

It was an ancient Mayan saying and it seemed to have an ominous portent. Could the decree be true and bring downfall to the seeker? It was something to take note.

They arose and indulged in a large breakfast before heading out with Diego in the car. It was a hot and humid morning, and they felt damp and sticky. The air was thick and balmy. The entire rainforest seemed to be at the mercy of the greenhouse effect. It was a natural phenomenon. This tropical effect was vital to the Mayan civilization. It controlled their movement and practices, and was an everyday part of their lives. For the northern man, it could seem unbearable. The temple was in a shady spot that they welcomed. When they arrived, it was a welcome sight and stood tall and magnificent in their eyes. It was also sanctuary from the immense heat. They joined Albert in the wings of the temple with his men, and were eager to

continue beyond their previous incursions. Today, they would go beyond the king's palace to look for some secret underground rooms. It was believed that below the temple, there were numerous caverns that served as tombs for the royals and may contain even more riches. Perhaps, even the king's family was buried beneath the temple, and if found, could be the key to solving the Mayan riddle. The team ventured into the lower depths and were intrigued by the possibilities. Albert seemed very secretive and withdrawn. Or was it just his haughtiness? It seemed he would not back down to the dangers or risks. They come upon a secret chamber that was apart from the rest of the main structure. It seemed like a gateway to the lost caverns. They were eager to take a look. When Julia accidentally tripped on a slab, she triggered a pendulum that came swinging down and knocked one of the men off his feet, impaling him and continued to rock over their heads. It was a frightening sight and they shivered. It seemed like a warning but they understood that they could be close to the prize.

As they entered, they observed the cave walls that seemed black and icy. They shimmered like a robe. It was breathtaking and wondrous to be so much below sea level. Walking around, they could feel the grandeur of the underground cave system. It was like a city beneath a shroud. The damp and coldness was prevalent. As they wandered, they took in the majesty. It was like sacred depths that could never be known to the outside world but were open to their eyes only. The height and majesty gave a heady feeling. They walked and explored further- touching the damp rocks and limestone that gleamed like emeralds. They walked further, and observed the trickling water coming down from the rocks and creating pools on the floor that looked like small cauldrons. The murmur of the dripping water seemed to echo in the catacombs. A light from high above where perhaps, the cave opened up to the land view, could be noticed, squinting and shedding its umbrage on the cascade. They walked through one shallow entrance into a nexus that seemed to connect two larger sections. It was like walking through a dark room in a museum. Upon entering, Albert was startled and jerked back holding off the others. They all faded a few steps back. A giant boa looked out at them. It was prodigious curling up in a ball in a corner guarding his abode. It looked fierce and averse to their presence, its hissing increasing and its body unwrithing in a position of attack. It was a formidable foe deep down in the depths of the abyss and seemed like an ancient spell. Was it the guardian of the treasure or a ancient serpent that persisted in the darkness since the time of the Mayans. The horror seemed to grip them. It was clear that it could crush its prey in an instant and swallow it whole. Albert flashed his torch in a confrontation. It seemed risky. The boa hissed and wound itself in a ball. It was the sole obstacle blocking them from the other side.

"Kill it," Albert called out to one of his men.

One of the followers ventured forward and brandished a sabre. He lifted it bracing to strike down when the giant rolling snake swooped one of its legs and dragged the man effortlessly into its embrace. The man was crushed by the sheer force and

power of the beast. His shrieking cries were unbearable. It seemed like a bulwark of Mayan pride. Perhaps, it was the last remnant of the king's defenses. The snake gnarled its fangs. Its beady eyes inspected the room wildly. They looked around for some kind of a sabotage. They knew with all Mayan traps, there was always something that could undo them. Emily noticed some spokes overhead. They were spikes hanging at the back entrance tied to a horizontal beam. It seemed connected to a rope and a wedge. If they could lure the snake to the entrance and release the wedge, the spikes could kill the snake. It was a brilliant observation.

Charles knew that snakes were attracted to light and that they could possibly use a torch to keep it entranced. He bravely took the chance and flailed a blazing torch in front of him causing the snake blindness. The light attracted the snake while Charles secretively crept to the fortified entrance. At his signal, Emily flung some stones at the lever. It missed as the snake hissed and gnarled at Charles. It seemed like a apocalyptic battle. Then, one of the stones hit its mark, and the lever gave way, and with a roar, the beam came crashing down. The spikes were embedded in the snake's body as Charles leapt away. It was a harrowing victory and somehow, they defeated a giant monster lurking in the depths. Charles clenched Emily close to his chest.

Beyond the chamber or dark passage was a door and just as they had imagined, the pendulum had unbarred it. Now they could descend into the caverns from this porthole. Lanterns and wicks gave sight in the darkness and they crept through some tunnels that were damp and mossy. These cryptic tunnels were a sign of a subterranean system of caves that existed beneath the temple that had running water which suggested an underground river. To build a temple over the river was a sign of superior intelligence and cunning. It all suggested an intricate and complex structure. They entered the caves that were hollow, deep and vast. There were separate tunnels and passages going in all directions. In the main artery, was the river, flowing through the center and leading out through one end. A further inspection revealed mosaics on the walls of bygone wars and ceremonial sacrifices that were still intact. Charles snapped some photos and the flash seemed to throw its light on the walls. It was an impressive and vast underground layer. They ventured around and took it all in. The vast space and hollow cave was breathtaking and proved to be another world. What was apparent was that the Mayans may have used it for baptisms, underground meetings and as a secret passageway. But what was its significance? There had to be something more. They ventured into one of the smaller caves and noticed nicks and markings showing dates as if on a Mayan calendar. It seemed to suggest some kind of a dating system that was prehistoric. Could this be an indication of a tracking system to foretell cosmic events such as the Solar Year? It was intriguing.

It seemed that these lower recesses were redolent of Albert's maps. It was clear that they may be closing in on a secret tunnel where a mysterious tomb could be at hand. Diego and Charles seemed even more attentive. Could Albert be leading them

to a secret layer that was recorded in his personal records? What would happen when they reached the layer? Would he hold them hostage or banish them to the caves forever. They were on their toes. The tunnels weaved and led to various adjoining caves where the bones of priests were scattered and the king's clergy. It seemed like an ominous dwelling and highly secretive. Albert's maps showed a gorge beneath the temple that resembled a mountain ridge. It was pierced by the river which they had seen and was confirmed. A vault existed beyond two partitions where they could be now entering. The underground ridge was spectacular reaching a great and colossal height that seemed like 20,000 leagues under the sea. Could this be where the king's vast riches were stored? It was cool at such depths and the temperature seemed to belie the humid jungle. It seemed possible that such a tunnel system was used not only for its privacy but for its coolness and fairness. It could easily be used for travel, migration and passage and dealing with the king's affairs. It was also a sanctuary and seemed sacred in a way, untouched by marauders or looters, and kept a secret for many centuries. An ancient Mayan spirit seemed to emanate in its hollow spaces and funnels. A great dormant spirit seemed to be lying in repose at the bottom of a deep hole. Albert's maps seemed to coincide with their path. They seemed to be going further into the depths of the ridge and nearing a secret layer. Charles and Diego were wary. They knew that at any moment Albert could turn on them or sabotage them. It was a risk they had to take. It was also a momentous journey and unprecedented trip to the gallows beneath the temple, where no explorers had ever gone. They felt a kinship with the Mayan brood. Their comings and goings, work and activities, worship and prayer seemed to be drifting in the smoke of the mountain. They were embarking on an unforgettable recovery and were destined for greatness. Might they fall upon the personal horde of the Mayans that was mentioned in books and folklore? Was Albert's sole purpose to enrich himself? They seemed to be in accordance with the map's directions and signals. Everything seemed to suggest a similarity to the old legends. The blue walls of the mountain, the intricate caves and layers, the traps and pitfalls that they had encountered, and the long descent. They were in the bellows and would not turn back until they could know the significance of their trip. Emily and Julia were captivated as were everyone else as their heads rolled up and their eyes gazed at the spectacular view of the underground mines. Gems lined the walls of the mountains and gleamed with dazzling brightness. They were now at the foot of the ridge where entry was possible through a triangular crack. It conformed exactly with the maps. They entered the threshold and awaited the inevitable.

It was a storehouse of gold. Albert was ecstatic. It seemed like his lifelong dream. One of the caves housed all the king's gold. When they entered they could notice chests of coins, goblets, plates and shields, all heaped up on top of the other.

Albert basked in the presence of the gold. As they walked around, they noticed a key tied to a necklace that resembled the chain that Charles saw on the eagles head. It was quite ironic. Examining more, they also noticed a shield with a Cosmic

Decree the same as the one that the monk owned. It seemed like everything was brought back to this cave according to the king's wishes.

But Albert's duplicity was now on full display. His eyes became fiery and red.

"My search is over," Albert gushed.

"This is the king's vault," Charles surmised.

"Indeed," Albert said. "And now to claim my glory, I will have to bind you up."

"What?" Charles exclaimed.

It seemed that Albert had been out for riches all along. His men gathered everyone and bound them up together. Diego, Charles, Emily and Julia squirmed in the ties.

"Finally, I can claim my destiny," Albert snarled. "All the riches are mine."

"What do you expect to do with us?" Charles asked.

"You will stay here tied up until we get the gold out," Albert answered. "Then it's just a matter of informing the public that the Duponts were lost in a cave-in."

"This is preposterous," Charles raved. "I demand you let us go."

"Sorry chap," Albert quipped back. "But the charade is up."

The men left no doubt to bring back tools for conveyance. It left everyone dismayed. This was a truly ill-fated turn of events. The Duponts had never expected to be lured and ransomed. It was frightful to conceive. Everything had turned upside down. They were no longer safe and were trapped. Something had to be done. They began to ponder on any means of escape.

"I will never forgive that scum," Charles scowled.

"Well dear, we need to think of a way out," Emily said practically.

"What will we do?" Julia asked.

"We need to try to loosen this rope," Diego addressed everyone.

"How?" Charles asked.

"Maybe, if we can all pull in a counterclockwise direction, it can be undone," Diego suggested.

"We can try," Charles stated.

All at once they began turning their hands in a counterclockwise direction. The rope began to feel loose and uncoiled. It was abrasive but they persisted hoping to break

free. Finally, with a little more fidgeting, they were able to undo it. They let out a sigh rubbing their hands and wrists that were red and charred.

"What do we do now?" Emily asked. "Albert and his men will likely be returning."

"I am not sure," Charles replied. "They have guns. We can't fight them."

"What about the key?" Julia said with a start.

"What do you mean?" Emily asked.

"Couldn't it be some kind of a clue?"

Emily examined the key. Suddenly, her face lit up. She seemed to remember something.

"I think I have a theory."

"What is it?" Charles asked.

"I think this key may lead to a secret gate or hideaway."

"What do you mean?" Charles asked.

"Do you remember the keyhole on the way out of the throne room?"

"Yes."

"I think this key fits into that keyhole."

"Do you really think it's possible?" Charles asked.

"Yes."

The magnitude of the thought seemed to weigh on them. That would mean that this solitary key that was made to look like a carving could unlock a way out or lead to a secret passageway. It could help them escape.

"But what if they come down before we reach it?" Charles asked.

"I think I can fix that," Diego said with a rise.

"What do you mean?" Charles asked.

Diego picked up the shield that was used to ward off evil forces.

"I think this could help."

They all looked at Diego with bemusement. It was the best they could do and would have to rely on the ancient spells of the Mayans to beat Albert. They ventured out daring to meet the challenge head-on.

They began making their way back up the main level through the catacombs. They no doubt expected to find Albert and his men making their way down. The tunnel was dimly lit and damp. A musky smell traveled through the air like thousands of years of aphrodisiac. They had neared the pit at the foot of the caves. Suddenly, they heard Albert's men approaching the nexus. They would have to divert them or be seen. Their only hope was if the foot bridge would collapse but they would also be trapped. Their predicament seemed as precarious as the bottomless pit. If they were caught, no one would ever know or hear back from them in such a forlorn place. The thought seemed daunting. They poised for an encounter. However, Diego used his wit and relied on the shield as a last resort. Could it possibly work? He knew of its magical powers but was it a mere hoax or could it be real? They had no other choice. He was no monk but perhaps, it could work for an average man. He recited the prayer inscribed on the shield and hoped a miracle would happen. They family braced for a intervention. Within moments, the magical powers were unleashed and the waters from the falling cascades seemed to whirl around and gushed outward causing a massive wave. Albert's men were overcome by the waves and had to retreat to one side. It was a chance to escape. The family raced over the bridge to the other side unnoticed while the waters surged and swirled around. It was like a protective shield. They marveled at the shield's work. They raced upstairs and hastened to test the key as a way out. It seemed that everything in the kingdom had an interconnectedness like a system of ropes and pulleys. Only the right actions could move them. They reached the bed chamber and Emily took out the key and grasped it firmly. She hoped it would work. By now, Albert's men were coming back upstairs and closing in. They had only a few moments. Emily held out the key and placed it into the lock. The key turned by itself and a hidden door inside the chamber opened. It seemed like a perfect escape. They hurried to the door and went out as it closed behind them. The door led to the outside grounds behind the temple. Likely, it was a secret route in case of an uprising or attempt on the king's life. For now, they had escaped the clutches of Albert. The family fled on the jeep that was still parked and unguarded. As they were riding away, Charles made Diego stop. He was struck by some revelation. Emily seemed concerned.

"Why are we stopping Charles? Albert and his men are no doubt behind us."

"I think I know what's happening," Charles confessed.

He took out the key that belonged to the ancient Monks and held it out in front of him. They all looked at it askance. Charles explained the connection.

"Can't you see," he said. "The priests had this key as a safeguard against the king."

"So what does that mean?" Emily asked.

"Don't you see," Charles asserted. "The key is a gateway to the after life in the Mayan legend. Hence, by using the key inside the king's vault, we may have unleashed a curse."

"A curse," Emily gasped.

"Yes a curse," Charles stated. "If the legend is true, then something cataclysmic may occur since we may have unlocked a secret doorway between two worlds."

"What do you mean?" Emily insisted.

"The legend says that a secret doorway separates this world from the next for all Mayans," Charles expounded. "To close the door, a holy man must use the key to restore the kingdom. I'm afraid we may have triggered a cataclysmic timer."

The thought made all of them shudder. Could Charles speculations be true? Could the key be tied to an inevitable demise or reawakening? They sped down the trail hoping to get ahead and seek help. They drove through the jungle to avoid recapture. But Albert had setup roadblocks and before they reached the outskirts they were stopped by a cargo truck and men with machine guns. It seemed hopeless. They were forced to give themselves up. It was shameful to be brought back in fetters to Albert. He was miffed and his pasty complexion seemed to be fuming. He led the family to separate rooms and had them kept apart. Charles and Emily were tied up together, Julia was cordoned in a cell, and Diego in a separate room. Now it would be harder to escape. Albert used the time to load up the gold.

Now, there was no way to break free or attempt another escape. They had no means to find help or be rescued. Charles and Emily seemed despondent. They consoled each other and tried to hope for the best. Only if they could retrieve the shield, it could be possible to fend off Albert.

"But how do we get it back?" Emily asked.

"We need a diversion," Charles stated. "But tied up like this, we can't even get close."

"Perhaps, we can lure one of the men?" Emily pondered.

"How?" Charles asked.

"We can tell him that we can lead him to a hidden vault if he released us."

"It could work."

They called out to the guard who was waiting outside the room. Emily made her desperate plea hoping he might take the bait. The promise of riches to anyone in this region was enticing and she hoped it could sway their captor. It worked. The captor agreed and was curious to know if a secret vault existed that could be a personal booty. He released the couple and they were finally freed.

They led the captor down one of the dark corridors that they knew would be quiet. The vast tunnels beneath the temple were so intricate that they resembled a

spider's web. One could easily be lost here but over time, Charles and Emily had developed a sense of direction. They knew the ins and outs despite the elaborate network of tunnels and discern a reasonable path. This tunnel led to a dead end and would be perfect for an ambush. But Charles was lacking anything to subdue the captor. He would have to think of a ruse. Before reaching the edge, Emily began to fake an attack of asthma. It concerned the guard and when he leaned over to inspect, Charles delivered a sweeping blow to the back of his head that plopped him to the ground. The ruse worked and the guard was laid out. They rushed back to the main portal to retrieve the shield and free the others. They located the shield in the king's bedroom, secured it, and furtively crept to the adjoining rooms to rescue Julia and Diego. They quickly found Julia in one of the adjacent rooms that was meant to be a storeroom, and freed her. Julia hugged her caretakers. Next they ventured to one of the solitary caves that were solely used for incantations and found Diego. He was ecstatic to see them and just like that, all of them were reunited. A sense of relief was felt by them all. Perhaps, the spirit of the Mayans were watching over them. It was time now to confront Albert and hope the shield might bring an end to his tyranny. They knew the rest of the men would be in the subterranean caves, undoubtedly loading the riches. They would have to confront them down there and hope that they could corner them and take them down. It was a highly risky mission.

When they reached the bottom level, they undoubtedly saw Albert supervising the heist. They would have to rely on the shield to divert him. But then Emily remembered the key that unlocked the secret door by which they had previously escaped. She wondered how Albert had intercepted them and how he knew their location. It dawned on her. The key must've also put the constellations in order that could be seen from the cone-like opening and must've alerted Albert of the escape attempt. Looking overhead, it was clear that the key had put into place a larger global positioning of Mayan satellites. Perhaps, the eagle on the crest could be the answer since it possessed the same key. It was a slew of possibilities that she couldn't quite sort out. Perhaps, a greater secret lurked beyond the temple that suggested even far greater riches. Whatever the case, Albert would still have to be stopped. They positioned the shield toward the glassy river that ran below the mountain. They hoped it could be resurrected by the shield's power. Despite their incantations, it was to no avail. The power was useless. By this time, Albert was roused and his gaze turned on them.

"Useless down here," he said. "The shield's power cannot override the tranquility of the river. It was one of the monk's wishes."

It was a grave mistake and their lack of the spiritual knowledge had undone them. They were now caught in the open. Charles was intent on keeping Albert at bay. He would have to use a ploy. In this predicament there was only one chance and Emily realizing the entire trappings of the Mayan machinery and signaled at Charles to observe the opening. Once he saw that the constellations had aligned perfectly

through the astrolabe, he knew the connection. They would have to bring the key to the eagle's crest to unlock the shield's true power and close the Pandora's box. It had to work and would shut off the gold to outsiders and the Mayan secrets forever. In just a couple of minutes the penumbra would set over the horizon and unlock the constellations and divert the entire grid. It was a historic event. As he predicted, the opening in the sky was eclipsed by the waxing of the moon, and the entire grid began to reconfigure. The mountains seemed to shake and the openings of caves closed with boulders and the perfectly still river began to flow backwards. The entire cave seemed to be closing in and some of Albert's men were crushed under falling rocks. In order to fulfill the prophecy, they would have to reach the crest and find a way to reverse the process. With Albert trapped, they used the shield's power to lead them through the morass and out into safety.

"What's going on?" Charles asked as they headed out of the temple.

"It's the curse of the Mayans," Diego replied. "The key must've set off a chain reaction. We must reach the crest to undo it."

"Astonishing," Charles remarked. "You mean the entire kingdom can fall on itself by a single key."

"Precisely," Diego said. "We better hurry if we want to reverse the process."

They boarded the jeep and sped up the mountain's edge to reach the top. It seemed like a storm had broke out over the entire civilization and the entire kingdom lay in crisis. This meant that the dams would break and flooding would overtake the land, the temples would cave-in, and the ruins might be washed out to sea. Apparently, the Mayans had sabotaged their entire great civilization in case of a foreign intruder. It was apocalyptic. To conceive that a single key could undo the entire social system was unthinkable. Somehow, the Mayans were too proud to ever let their secrets be known. Perhaps, the eagles' head may be the answer to the riddle.

The jeep sped towards the site. The eagle's head loomed over the horizon like a giant sage. It might be the key to breaking the spell. They reached the top and hurried to the cliff's edge. They beheld the great sculpture. Astonishingly, the eagle's head had tilted and was now facing the West. Somehow, it was linked to the recalibration of the entire order of the civilization. Its pronounced head seemed to now be even more distinguished. Charles inspected it and was amazed by the changed angle. It seemed unthinkable.

"What is happening?" Charles inquired.

"It is the prophecy," Diego answered.

"What do you mean?"

"The legend says that whoever used the key would unleash an irreversible sequence that would lead to the demise of the entire kingdom. When we used the key, it triggered the event and now everything is self-destructing. The Mayans had devised this in order to save their kingdom and since the king's life could be in danger when we used the key, it was the final straw. The inception of the collapse of the kingdom. As the eagle's head faces the West, so too shall the rivers flood and the temples and shrines be decimated. We need to locate the portal."

"What portal?"

"Somewhere where the key fits."

They began looking around and noticed a small gap near the neck. It had come into view when the head had moved. Charles climbed towards the gap.

"Be careful dear," Emily called out.

"I will," Charles called back.

Near the gap, he noticed a grotto that was previously hidden. They climbed in. Diego waved his flashlight. They peered into the darkness and noticed carvings on the wall. Some of them were of the Eagle Point, and the temple and the surrounding areas. They seemed to suggest a catastrophic event where the kingdom would fall unto itself if a certain sequence was set into motion. Similar to the key being used in the king's layer. It could be possible. Above the grotto, at the mouth of the cave, was a dial of the constellations similar to the one at the temple, suggesting a connection. And by the entrance, was a keyhole, that could be the means to reverse the countdown. It all made sense. If an outside enemy breached the grounds, the key would have to be used at the alternate site to reverse the self-destruction. It was brilliant. They smiled and were amused by such an elaborate handiwork. Charles held out the key and was giddy to use it. At that moment, Emily's voice cried out. They rushed outside and scanned the vicinity. Albert and his men had reached the summit. And they had seized Emily and Julia. Charles was dismayed. It was a standoff.

"Now if you don't mind, please come down from the ledge," Albert shouted.

"Please let them go," Charles insisted.

"Not until you come down," Albert hearkened.

Charles and Diego reluctantly lingered down. Albert was incensed and his eyes seemed to be consumed with a fiery hatred.

"Now you will turn around and face the ledge," Albert demanded.

He had everyone turn their backs and face the ledge which was overlooking a steep drop. It was the moment of truth.

"You have what you want," Charles called out. "Why don't you let us go?"

"How do I know you won't go to the authorities," Albert asked.

"We are trapped," Charles said. "We might not be able to get out."

The eagle's head seemed to move slightly more shaking the mountain and causing tremors. They all gripped themselves.

"Looks like I'm out of time," Albert said. "Now for the coup de grace."

"Please," Charles howled.

Suddenly, more tremors were felt that seemed to cause a fissure and cracks in the mountain and Albert's men were thrown around. Albert was tossed across a giant ridge. The family could make a break. They ran towards some wooded enclosure that seemed stable. It was the moment of truth. Charles would have to make an important choice. If he used the key they might all be recaptured. But if he resisted, the kingdom would be lost forever. The choice was clear. They could not risk the downfall of such a noble vestige even if their lives were at stake. Somehow, the end would have to justify the means. Charles gave his family a tender look. Then he zigzagged towards the cave across the falling rocks. Albert promptly followed him across the fault line. It seemed death-defying like two trapeze artists. Charles reached the cave and breathed a sigh. By now, Albert was scaling the mouth of the nest. Charles used the key inside the entry, initiating the backward timer (mechanism). Everything seemed to jerk to a stop like a rolling rock coming to a rest. There was a slight pause. Then the constellations above the door seemed to move counterclockwise. The dial turned until they were back in their original order. A light flashed from the dial like gleaming gems. The timer was reversed and everything seemed to pause and reset. The earth began to move and it could feel like a vibration beneath the feet. The giant fortress and structure seemed to revert to its original position. Outside the eagles head began to turn eastward. Albert who was climbing the ledge was in the path of the eagle's piercing look. Its sudden movement jarred him and knocked him loose from the ledge. He was thrown with a mighty blow from the eagle's rearing head and sent crashing down the steep mountain side. A wailing cry growing fainter was all that remained. The evil conniving artist had met his demise. It was a moment of relief.

Charles reunited with his family outside the cave. They were ecstatic to see him and by now, everything was returning to its original form. The eagles head was back in place and across the land, the temples were saved from ruin, the waters were tranquil, and the destruction had stopped. A new dawn was beginning to break over the land like a wild spring. They returned to their jeep and rode out of the valley. It was a heroic day to see the demise of Albert and behold a great kingdom brought back to life.

They returned to their bungalows and made preparations to return back to America. Everything was back in place and they had outlived a great adventure. They thanked Diego for everything he had done and for his hospitality. 'Don't mention it,' was all Diego said and was servile as always. The treasure was restored that Albert had tried to pilfer, and the key and the shield were sealed away. The ministry of affairs oversaw the entire preservation of the temple and all its relics to ensure that a disaster would never again fall on the noble city. It was a sweet finality to the mysteries and secrets of the kingdom. Never again would treachery prevail against the citadel of the Mayans. Their livelihood would never be threatened. Looking out on their dynasty, it seemed the Gods were grinning in agreement.

Sanchez drove them back to the airport and gave them all woven bracelets. They thanked him for his dutifulness. Charles winked at him in a final overture. On the airplane, back home, Charles reminisced and noted the events in a diary. He wanted to have a record of everything that had transpired and perhaps, it could be published one day. But he also wanted to retain the secrets of the Mayans that they could never fall into the wrong hands. It seemed like an oath that he would carry with him for the rest of his life. He rested the diary on his lap and looked out of the window at the fading city of the Mayans as the plane cruised in the skies. Emily and Julia were reading magazines. It seemed to diminish in his view but the great legendary city stood tall in his heart.

--The End--